

## From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review



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**Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge**

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If you enter “Harry S. Truman” as a subject entry on Amazon.com , you will get 396 authors on some aspect of President Truman. If you visit the H-Diplo website and check out [the roundtable page](#), you will note eight roundtables that deal with some aspect of Truman’s foreign policies, most recently [Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s \*Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan\*](#), [Arnold Offner’s \*Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953\*](#), and [Robert Beisner’s \*Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War\*](#). The primary sources on Truman and his Cold War policies take up over ten pages in Wilson Miscamble’s bibliography but many of the manuscript collections and Department of State records have been worked over by other historians.

After an introductory chapter on the nature of Truman’s views on foreign policy before 1945 and a chapter on “Franklin Roosevelt’s Uncertain Legacy” to Truman in terms of strategy toward the Soviet Union and the agreements from the Tehran and Yalta Conferences, Wilson Miscamble explores Truman’s direction of policy toward Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union in five compact chapters and a concluding chapter. Miscamble focuses on Truman and his interaction with Secretaries of State Edward Stettinius, James Brynes, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, informal advisors like Harry Hopkins and Joseph Davies, and British leaders during the period of April through December 1945.

Do historians need another study of Truman in this period? Miscamble’s answer is yes and the author offers an approach that is significantly different than other popular “life and times” studies, studies that integrate domestic and foreign policy issues, studies that explore the interaction of Washington with major allies and adversaries in the origins of the Cold War, or studies that examine the international and domestic factors shaping Washington’s Cold War policies. Starting with Chapter III Miscamble looks very closely at Truman, almost day by day at the start as Truman struggled to cope with the enormous responsibilities and challenges that he faced in replacing FDR in the aftermath of Yalta and as both fronts in WWII came to a conclusion. Miscamble captures better than previous studies Truman’s effort to bring his limited experience in foreign policy and his limited skills in evaluating international relation problems and strategies to a scrambling effort to find out from the Yalta documents and from Roosevelt’s advisors what Roosevelt was trying to accomplish with Stalin. Truman attempted to do this as doubts and debate swirled around him on the “Yalta accords, the potentially explosive Polish issue, the disputes over the composition of other Eastern European governments, the differences over German matters ....,” and the strategy to force Japan to surrender and end the Pacific war. Just as Robert Beisner’s study of Dean Acheson provides a revealing perspective on Truman’s ultimate Secretary of State and their relationship, Miscamble offers a revealing window into Truman’s “learning on the job” and his relationships with his advisers on relations with the Soviet Union.

The commentators have all made extensive and important contributions to the study of the Cold War and raise in their assessments a number of pertinent issues for discussion. Their

observations on the book and Cold War issues are insightful and suggest areas of future exploration as we acquire access to more primary sources and perspectives from all sides of the Cold War.

1.) Miscamble's central objective is to address the issue of whether Truman attempted to implement FDR's policies toward the Soviet Union and when and why he ultimately moved away from FDR's approach. Most, if not all, of the commentators seem to agree that Miscamble has succeeded in this quest. Closely tracking Truman's efforts to find out FDR's policies, Miscamble argues that Truman, by giving extensive attention to advisers such as Hopkins and Davies, by rejecting Winston Churchill's increasingly alarmist requests to abandon agreements recently made with Stalin that the British leader himself had initiated, and by supporting Hopkins' and Brynes' efforts to negotiate deals with Stalin on Poland, Eastern Europe, and Germany, clearly thought he was following in the footsteps of his predecessor.

2.) The commentators primarily question Miscamble on his assessment of FDR's policies and attitudes towards Stalin. Miscamble is quite critical of FDR in Chapter II. The author suggests that FDR has a benign view of Stalin and his policies, was too conciliatory towards Stalin at Yalta, and held back on economic assistance to the Soviet Union and the sharing of information on atomic power in order to coax Stalin to cooperate rather than to pressure the Soviet leader to accept U.S. views on the Yalta agreements. Some of the reviewers, however, see more calculation in FDR, more of Warren Kimball's "The Juggler", as well as more sensitivity to the enormous benefits of Soviet resistance to Hitler and the important of affirming Soviet participation in the final defeat of Japan. Miscamble recognizes FDR's and Truman's strategic calculations but he would have preferred a more quid pro quo approach favored by American Soviet specialists such as George Kennan as well as a more restrained stance based on recognition of the nature of Stalin and his regime.

3.) Miscamble devotes a chapter to Truman's handling of the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, the "atomic diplomacy" thesis of Gar Alperovitz, the dispute over the impact of the atomic bombs on Japan's decision to surrender, and the morality issue. Miscamble engages Hasegawa's study with respect to the author's depiction of Japan's decision-making on ending the war and Stalin's maneuvering to maximize his gains versus Japan. Miscamble, however, rejects Hasegawa's suggestion that Truman had alternatives to using the atomic bombs as he believes that Truman correctly chose the lesser of two evils in this situation.

4.) Another objective of the author is to challenge the larger evolving revisionist effort to shift major responsibility for the origins of the Cold War from Stalin to Truman and U.S. policymakers. Miscamble forthrightly rejects this from his preface to his conclusion, in which he quotes Tony Judt to the effect that "Revisionism, the wishful search for evidence that the U.S. bore primary responsibility for the origin and pursuit of the Cold War, is now a dead duck." The commentators in different ways and to different degrees question this conclusion.

5.) Miscamble's assessment of Stalin and Soviet policy attracts considerable discussion from the reviewers as Miscamble repeatedly makes it very clear that there was no opportunity for an accommodation with Stalin and that the sooner Truman broke with FDR's approach the better. Without disagreeing with Miscamble's view on Stalin's character and repressive record, the reviewers point to the importance of considering the larger interaction that took place between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as the war came to an end and in its aftermath. U.S. policy involved more than Truman and the Secretary of State, as American diplomats and military officials expressed more critical views than Truman on Soviet policy and encouraged actions with respect to issues like Germany and reparations and the Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe that had an impact on Stalin. For example, there is disagreement over whether or not Truman and Brynes wrote off Eastern Europe as much as Miscamble suggests.

6.) Post-revisionists in the 1970s emphasized the interaction that took place between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and examined the impact of actions, suspicions, and miscalculations affecting both sides and transforming the inevitable disagreements in the aftermath of WWII into the Cold War. A number of the commentators suggest that Miscamble's does not given sufficient attention to this interaction, especially the impact of U.S. actions and inactions on Stalin in areas such as the control of atomic energy, U.S. complaints about the Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe, and issues involving Germany. On the other hand, several reviewers suggest that the interaction really had the most impact in changing Truman's views on Stalin and the possibility of cooperation than on Stalin's objectives.

7.) Miscamble is not reluctant to bring up moral issues in his study not only on the atomic bombing of Japan but also in general on Truman and the Cold War. Although critical of Truman's effort to implement FDR's approach toward Stalin, Miscamble praises the effort "to meet the aggressive designs of the Soviet Union. Men like Truman, Marshall, and Acheson ... deserve praise and gratitude from all those who value democratic ideals today ... [and] it is essential that historians of today appreciate that Truman's administration navigated through 'puzzling and perilous' times to establish eventually a foreign policy whose main elements were appropriate and which protected American security and defended some good measure of democratic freedom in the world."

8.) How does Miscamble evaluate Truman overall as a foreign policy leader? The author advances a mixed view on Truman that at times emphasizes his limitations more than his strengths. Truman did not exhibit much conceptual understanding or recognize the complexity of many international issues. He relied extensively on advisers, followed their advice, never developed a strategy to deal with the transformation precipitated by WWII, and tended to move from one ad hoc policy decision to the next. Truman was far too slow to recognize the dangers of trying to conciliate and cooperate with Stalin. On the other hand, Miscamble does praise Truman for learning about the Soviet Union, and for relying on perceptive policy makers like George Marshall and Dean Acheson.

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9.) Finally, these questions, issues, and perspective lead to the historiographical issue of where Miscamble stands in the evolving schools of interpretation on the Cold War, regardless of how limiting and misleading the labels may be. Miscamble identifies the most with the post-revisionist perspective. However, he is far more critical of FDR's handling of Soviet relations than the post-revisionists and he gives much less importance to miscalculation and misunderstanding than the post-revisionists. He tends to prefer more traditional critics of FDR, Truman, and Stalin. Thus, if students ask for a post-Cold War traditionalist perspective Miscamble may be the best source.

*--Tom Maddux*

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