

From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review



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Reviewers: Frank Costigliola, Alonzo Hamby, Robert Jervis, Eduard Mark, David S. Painter, Chester Pach.

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Author's Response by Wilson D. (Bill) Miscamble, C.S.C., History Department, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.

Let me begin by thanking Tom Maddux for organizing this roundtable on my book and the six scholars who participated in it. I am grateful for their willingness to engage the arguments I present and the conclusions I reach in *From Roosevelt to Truman* (hereafter *FRTT*). I should clarify that I know each of my commentators to some degree and have benefited from the personal and professional kindness of a number of them. I also draw significantly upon the work of three of them (Hamby, Mark, and Jervis) in my book. Whatever their past associations with me, these five distinguished historians and a terrific political scientist have been generous enough to provide honest and critical evaluations of my book. Let me offer a brief response to their comments in the same spirit of forthright scholarly exchange.

I suspect that many historians share a fear that their published work — the product of countless hours of toil — will sink like the proverbial stone leaving barely a ripple on the historiography of their chosen area. I confess that as I worked away (off and on over the years!) on yet another book on the United States and the origins of the Cold War some variation of this fear entered my mind. “Will anyone be interested? Hasn’t this ground been more than well-covered, already?” went my own questions. Obviously, I answered the latter question in the negative because I concluded that the development of postwar American foreign policy and the contributions of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman to it were not well understood. I tried to rectify that situation. Now, a number of my commentators note that my arguments are not particularly “new” and that specialists in the field will find much that is “familiar” (to borrow from Chester Pach) in the broad story that unfolds in my work. I readily concede that there are some grounds for this observation but my aim in this book was not to fashion some novel interpretation but to present the most accurate understanding of American foreign policy during this crucial period and the impact upon it of the leadership transition from Roosevelt to Truman. This is what I (modestly, of course) claim to have done.

Rev. Wilson D. (Bill) Miscamble, C.S.C. joined the permanent faculty at Notre Dame in 1988 after completion of the Ph.D. at Notre Dame in 1980 and was ordained a priest by the Congregation of the Holy Cross in 1988. Miscamble's primary research interests are American foreign policy since World War II and the role of Catholics in 20th century U.S. foreign relations. His book, *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950*, published in 1992 by Princeton University Press received the Harry S. Truman Book Award. He also has authored *Keeping the Faith, Making a Difference* (2000), and edited *American Political History: Essays on the State of the Discipline* [with John Marszalek] (1997), and *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Addresses* (2003). His next major project is a book-length survey entitled – “The Search for Influence: Catholics and American Foreign policy from the Spanish-American War to the War in Iraq.” This study will shed further light on the intersection of religion and foreign policy and will fill a definite lacunae in the field of U.S. diplomatic history.

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I trust my book will have some impact in the field and influence how historians, their students, and the broader public think of the origins of the Cold War because there is still a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding on the subject. Let me illustrate this by quick reference to three recent books which advance rather flawed interpretations of important aspects of the early Cold War. Mary Glantz in her *FDR and the Soviet Union* (2005) writes approvingly of Roosevelt's cooperative approach to Stalin and then posits that Truman quickly reversed it under the influence of Averell Harriman and other anti-Soviet officials. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy* (2005)¹ argues that Truman raced to use the atomic bomb against Japan before the Soviets could enter the conflict and questions the American claim for the military necessity of the bomb in securing Japan's defeat. In some ways he provides an updated version of the old "atomic diplomacy" thesis. Geoffrey Roberts's *Stalin's Wars* (2007)² paints the picture of a rather cautious Stalin eager to continue the Grand Alliance after the war and willing to reach a settlement with the western powers. This benign portrait allows Roberts to attribute a major portion of the "blame" for the Cold War to the failures of western statesmen. If only Truman, Byrnes, Attlee, Bevin, and company had been more sensitive to Stalin's legitimate concerns etc. goes this familiar (to use that word again) argument--much favored in many revisionist interpretations--the Cold War might have been avoided. Either directly or indirectly my work vigorously challenges the arguments of the three historians mentioned above. In light of this I acknowledge gratefully Chester Pach's observation that my work "has breathed life into old questions about the emergence of U.S. Cold War policies," but I must add that these are still very much LIVE and debated questions.

I am very glad that my six commentators from their diverse perspectives accept—with just some limited qualifications—my basic argument that Truman sought to continue FDR's cooperative approach towards Stalin's Soviet Union. If nothing else I trust my book will lay to rest notions of a sharp and deliberate reversal in policy towards the Soviet Union and the associated exaggeration of the significance of the Truman-Molotov conversation of April 23, 1945. Similarly, the commentators—aside from some mild carping by David Painter—appear to accept the essential case I make regarding Truman's decision to use the atomic bombs to end the war against Japan. I am truly glad of this and assume that it reflects in part the positive impact of splendid works like Richard Frank's *Downfall: the End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (1999), which so influenced my own thinking.

The area that attracted the most attention — and much of it critical — from my commentators concerned my forceful and negative treatment of Franklin Roosevelt's wartime policy towards the Soviet Union and his planning for the postwar world. If I were interested in orchestrating a more positive response to my book, I assuredly would have tempered my criticism of FDR. But there already has been too much of that and consequently FDR has been given a pass for his sad misjudgments concerning Stalin.

¹ [Editorial Note- An H-Diplo roundtable on *Racing the Enemy*, published in January and February 2006, may be found at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/#hasegawa>].

² [Editorial Note- An H-Diplo roundtable on *Stalin's Wars*, published on 22 July 2007, may be found at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/#roberts>].

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Historians too often dutifully engage in a kind of apologetics to explain Roosevelt's actions and even the estimable Eduard Mark lurches somewhat in this direction in his commentary. But the various palliative explanations, extenuating circumstances, and mitigating excuses offered by the roundtable contributors don't persuade me from the need to acknowledge honestly the major limitations in FDR's efforts both in dealing with Stalin and in preparing for the postwar world. In saying this let me clarify for Frank Costigliola that I am not questioning FDR's manliness/masculinity in dealing with Stalin. I question his judgment. Let me also add here my thanks to Lon Hamby for appreciating my argument that FDR clung to assumptions regarding the Soviet Union that were quite common in liberal circles of his day, yet profoundly mistaken.

An area where I provide a somewhat different and more richly textured analysis than is found in the existing literature is in my portrayal of Harry Truman and his struggle to get some grasp of the foreign policy for which he bore ultimate responsibility. Chester Pach notes that I don't hold back from noting Truman's "limitations and deficiencies" and Bob Jervis observes that I show "Truman's ad hoc, confused, and often desultory style of foreign-policy making." Obviously I build on the work of scholars such as Hamby and Deborah Larson in my depiction of Truman, but I trust that readers of my book will gain from it an appreciation of Truman as a more complex and real person and policymaker. Such an appreciation is essential to comprehend how American foreign policy developed from 1945 through to 1947.

Whatever his limitations, Truman proved capable of learning on the job and eventually came to terms with the need to contain Soviet expansion. Some of the commentators (especially David Painter) question the need for this. Painter implies, although doesn't explicitly state, that if only some more gentle soul (say Henry Wallace) had occupied the oval office rather than Truman—someone who was more understanding of Stalin's needs and more trusting of his intentions such that he generously would share the atomic bomb, etc—then the Cold War might have been avoided. But as I demonstrate in my book, Truman and Byrnes went to considerable lengths to reach genuine settlements with Stalin, especially as regards Eastern Europe. They tried negotiation and compromise but to little avail. Stalin hardly seemed reassured. In the end, the major moves to "contain" the Soviets came only after the Truman administration rightly concluded that Stalin's ambitions extended far beyond Eastern Europe—in Iran, the eastern Mediterranean and even Western Europe. One could ask if the United States should have conceded to Stalin on these issues so as to "reassure" him, but the answer is blatantly obvious to all but those who continue to cling to a naïve view of Stalin.

At the risk of taxing the stamina of the readers of this symposium let me offer a few further comments in direct response to specific points made by individual commentators. Frank Costigliola raises a concern that my "condemnation of the Soviets is especially striking because it is not matched by a similar criticism of the Nazi Germany wartime enemy." Let me assure him that the reason for this is that my book is not primarily concerned with U.S. attitudes towards or relations with Nazi Germany. Yet if he wants a hint of my attitude to that ghastly regime, I refer him to p. 249 of *FRTT* where in discussing the critics of

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Truman's use of the atomic bomb I write the following: "Perhaps they might also ask if the weapon had been ready say a year before would they have refrained from using it against Hitler's Berlin where they might have wiped out the viperous head of the Nazi regime and possibly saved the lives of millions on the battlefields and in the gas ovens."

By the time I got to the end of David Painter's commentary I began to get the distinct impression that he didn't much like my book. He appears overly defensive and reluctant to concede on any point for fear that the whole revisionist house of cards might come tumbling down—as indeed much of it should. Painter is also exercised because of the topics he alleges I ignore in my book, e.g. colonialism and racism, and the economic influences on U.S. foreign policy and so forth. While I do touch on such topics — see for example pp. 41-43 where I discuss FDR's postwar economic planning and attitudes to colonial empires -- Painter's larger point stands. There are topics that I don't address at length in my book. But what I would claim is that I have addressed the central issues involved in exploring the transition from Roosevelt to Truman and the development of foreign policy in the immediate postwar period.

Eduard Mark knows more about Eastern Europe and Soviet behavior and intentions there than I could ever hope to learn. I relied on his work in my book and found especially helpful his crucial article on the "War Scare of 1946" and his brilliant *CWIHP* paper "Revolution by Degrees."³ I look forward to reading his forthcoming books that he mentions in footnotes 1 and 14 of his commentary. I am sure that I will learn much from them. Given his critical roundtable comments, however, I worry that I may not have drawn as accurately from his work as I should have in my study, and if so, I apologize. I thought I understood the "national front strategy" he ascribed to the Soviets and that I fairly described it as Stalin's effort to advance his version of socialism by "caution and deception." (See my discussion pp. 292-94 of *FRTT*) On the subject of Soviet tactics in Eastern Europe, I am curious if Mark objects to my relying upon the conclusion of Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianski that "from the very beginning of their occupation of Eastern Europe, the Soviets manipulated East European leaders, bullied and deceived the populations, arrested and shot political opponents. They operated cynically and forcefully to accomplish their aims." How seriously should we take the supposed Soviet commitment to "bourgeois democracy?"

Chester Pach raises some question about the role I assign to the British in influencing American policy. He suggests that I "create the impression that without British impetus U.S. policy would have remained indecisive" in 1947. I think this is an over-reading of my argument. It was Soviet actions and intentions that ultimately forced the American response, but the British did influence the timing of it. However, I am glad that Pach introduced this matter for I consider it an important contribution of my book to include the British in the account of the origins of the Cold War. Understanding British Foreign

³ [Ed. Note] Eduard Mark, "Revolution By Degrees: Stalin's National-Front Strategy for Europe, 1941-1947," *CWIHP* (Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars) Working Paper No. 31," <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/ACFB11.pdf>.

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Secretary Ernest Bevin's great concern to draw a somewhat hesitant and reluctant United States into the European vacuum to counter Soviet influence is crucial for grasping the dynamics at the beginning of the Cold War.

Reading Bob Jervis's commentary was truly stimulating. I appreciate his reflections on the various stages through which American policy progressed and I would certainly agree with the first three he lists. I need to give more thought to the "fourth phase" which involved moving from containment to a "more offensive stance." Jervis also addressed my willingness to engage a number of the moral issues raised in my history. I am glad that, for the most part, he judges my efforts in this area to be responsible but he concludes with a challenge to my criticism of FDR. He concedes that Roosevelt's policies towards the Soviet Union may well have been misguided and wrong, but notes that FDR's desire to preserve "the possibility for harmonious post-war relations" and his hopes for a "better world" made his "gamble" worth taking. Thus, Jervis suggests, "the policies of Roosevelt and the early Truman administration may then have been both deeply flawed and moral." I remain unsure that "good intentions" alone can be used to justify actions. Serious reflection and careful weighing of policy options and their likely consequences surely must be required. If Roosevelt had done due diligence regarding Stalin and moved beyond his hunches and intuitions and naïve conceit that he could establish a personal relationship, one might conclude differently about him. At least Truman and Byrnes eventually broke free of FDR's "hunches" regarding Stalin. I regret it took them so long to do so.

Lon Hamby's final section which he titled "The Achievement" was a pleasure to read and I commend it to all those who begin their reading of this roundtable by glancing at the author's response! I'm not sure my book is the "new hegemonic work on the origins of the Cold War" but I hope it will prove of interest to scholars of various perspectives and deepen our collective understanding of this crucial subject.

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