

From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review



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Review by Chester Pach, Ohio University

In his blunt and provocative account of Harry Truman's journey into the Cold War, Wilson Miscamble tells a familiar story, often in familiar ways. According to Miscamble, the Cold War emerged because of Josef Stalin's ambition, aggressiveness, and paranoia. "No action of the Truman administration," Miscamble asserts, could have changed or reassured Stalin. No missed opportunity on the American side could have satiated Stalin's ambition for power and control." (327) Yet try Truman did to secure Stalin's cooperation during most of his first two years in the White House. Miscamble argues that Truman continued Franklin D. Roosevelt's efforts to forge a postwar partnership with the Soviet Union until his administration mounted a belated, "defensive effort" to "check Soviet advances" in Western Europe and, eventually, East Asia. (327) After a fumbling and uncertain start as foreign policy leader, Truman finally took "essential" steps in 1947 to challenge "the Soviet threat to liberal democracy." (328) This story of Soviet aggression and U.S. reaction, FDR's supposed naiveté and Truman's reluctant but necessary departure from his predecessor's policies is as old as U.S. histories of the Cold War. Some of the main themes in Miscamble's analysis have been prominent in Cold War studies for more than half a century

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Yet Miscamble is much too good an historian not to add some important new dimensions to an otherwise familiar story. Especially interesting is his lengthy, meticulous, and thoughtful analysis of Truman's stewardship of foreign policy. As much as he lauds the administration's Cold War achievements, Miscamble is surprisingly tepid about Truman. Indeed, the author reaches troubling conclusions about Truman's grasp of international affairs and his ability to devise strategies to advance U.S. goals and interests. "Those favorably disposed to Truman's foreign policy should neither present him as the main architect of it nor exaggerate his capabilities," Miscamble declares. (329) He does neither. Instead, Miscamble maintains that the Truman administration ultimately did the right thing by containing Soviet power not so much because of the president's leadership but almost despite it.

Miscamble concentrates on individual decision makers, especially Truman, and the policies they formulated. His goal is “to capture something of the[ir] world . . . with its inevitable compromises, ultimate objectives only dimly perceived, and constantly competing pressures that confused and obscured policy vision.” He appreciates “the messiness of policy making,” and he has a remarkable talent for explaining how issues that seemed clear, even simple in retrospect never appeared that way to the contemporaries who confronted them. He concedes that his history is “Washington-centered,” even “White House-centered,” but explains that he wants to probe the ways that individuals have made “a difference in foreign policy.” He insists that both critics and proponents have misunderstood Truman, especially when they have portrayed the president as the feisty, decisive leader who lived by the motto that “the buck stops here.” Miscamble has no desire to replace this popular and appealing image of Truman with another “one-dimensional” portrait. (xii-xiii) Even though he often deprecates Truman’s Soviet policies and the president’s uncertainties and hesitations in formulating them, he also appreciates Truman’s admirable qualities. Truman, he says, was forthright and direct, someone who dealt with his advisors in straightforward fashion, unlike FDR who rarely, if ever, took his associates into his confidence. Especially important was Truman’s conviction that individuals should keep their word and nations should abide by their agreements, a basic value that shaped his approach to the Soviet Union during 1945-46.

Yet what stands out in Miscamble’s discussion are Truman’s limitations and deficiencies. Truman, Miscamble says, had a “distaste for complexity” and was reluctant “to engage in creative or conceptual thinking.” Temperamental outbursts and conspicuous displays of decisiveness could not conceal “a deep insecurity.” (89) Truman understandably struggled to find his bearings when he suddenly became president after Roosevelt’s death in April 1945. But Miscamble emphasizes that international issues continued to flummox Truman during his first months in office—and beyond. As the war ended in Europe, questions about surrender and occupation arrangements left the president “forever struggling to gain some grasp on the situations.” (124) He “hardly aimed to impose coherence and consistency on his nation’s foreign policy. He simply reacted to proposals and to counsel as best he could.” (127) At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, he deferred to his advisers, especially Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, and settled for “more of a supporting role.” (208) Truman authorized the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to shorten the war and save American lives, according to Miscamble. But the president’s decisiveness consisted of little more than proceeding with “the predetermined policy” of using the bomb when available. (225) As Byrnes struggled with questions about recognizing provisional governments in Eastern Europe during the fall of 1945, Miscamble notes that “Truman’s own thinking at this time is, to be kind, a little hard to pin down.” (259) Among the president’s many problems was a failure to understand that Stalin was “one of the world’s greatest moral monsters.” (193) As a result, during the next year “Truman provided no firm hand on the tiller of the American ship of state as it navigated into increasingly uncharted waters.” (262) When the president did take a strong stand in the face of Communist provocations, as he did in March 1946 over the removal of Soviet troops from Iran, it was supposedly only because British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin encouraged him to do so.

Miscamble shows that on most issues involving relations with the Soviets, Truman depended heavily on his advisers. The two most influential in 1945-46 were Joseph Davies and James F. Byrnes. Davies's importance is something of a surprise; his influence overshadowed that of Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, Admiral William D. Leahy, and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, aides who often figure prominently in histories of Truman's emerging Cold War policies. Miscamble, however, demonstrates that Davies had a close relationship with Truman and shaped the president's thinking on Soviet matters during his first weeks in office, at Potsdam, and occasionally thereafter until September 1946. Miscamble deplors Davies's naive misunderstanding of Stalin and his efforts to discourage the formulation of tougher U.S. policies to deal with Soviet challenges. That Davies had the president's ear, however, buttresses Miscamble's contention that Truman was determined to follow a conciliatory approach toward the Soviets. Byrnes was considerably more important than Davies; indeed, he had almost a free hand to pursue negotiations with the Soviets during the fall of 1945 while Truman concentrated on the transition from war to peace in domestic affairs. Miscamble challenges conventional wisdom that Byrnes lost the president's confidence when he failed to keep the White House sufficiently informed about his negotiations in Moscow in December 1945. The resulting tensions between the president and his secretary of state were more about style rather than substance, according to the author. Byrnes carried the main burden of foreign policy until he left the administration a year later and, like the president, continued to hope for practical agreements with the Soviets until his final months as secretary of state. The animosity between Truman and Byrnes, Miscamble asserts, arose not from disagreements about international policy or who ultimately made the decisions but over the campaign of 1948.

One of Miscamble's most important arguments is that neither the president nor any of his principal advisors during the early Cold War were effective strategists. "Surprisingly," Miscamble writes, "neither Byrnes nor Truman appeared to grasp fully the dramatic impact of World War II on the architecture of the world." Nixon and Kissinger they weren't. Neither thought deeply about the international configuration of power; neither had clear ideas about how to deal with a world in which British capabilities were declining and Soviet power growing. Byrnes was primarily a tactician, with long experience in government as a negotiator, who searched for the means to bargain effectively with the Soviets. No grand strategy guided Byrnes or Truman at Potsdam or, for that matter, during the next two years. George F. Kennan's Long Telegram of February 1946 provided intellectual support for those in the administration who thought that conciliation would never produce a lasting settlement with the Soviets, but "it had no immediate impact on policy." (280) As the Truman administration moved toward stronger policies to resist the advance of Soviet power in mid-1946, U.S. policy, in Miscamble's judgment, still emerged in ad hoc fashion, devoid of "an overall strategic framework. The president failed to provide broad guidance. . . . His engagement with foreign policy remained episodic at best." (287) Even the Truman Doctrine, which seemed to promise global containment, failed to provide "any explicit course of action" about how to meet Soviet challenges. (310)

Much of Miscamble's book is a sustained critique of the Truman administration for adhering to a misguided effort to conciliate the Soviets that it only gradually abandoned in 1946 and did not completely shed until the following year. Truman, in Miscamble's judgment, did not engage international issues consistently or thoughtfully, accepted flawed advice about Soviet matters, and persisted in naive, futile, or foolish efforts to forge an international partnership with the Soviet Union after the surest bond—a common enemy—had vanished. One wonders, then, how an administration that, in the author's estimation, got so many things wrong in dealing with the Soviets ultimately got it right. A brief and suggestive concluding chapter sketches the answer. By 1947, "the Americans finally recognized with some clarity" that FDR's vision of great power cooperation in the postwar world was "an illusion." Miscamble praises Truman for being "capable of learning" as well as recognizing his own limitations and relying "on other capable policy makers." The State Department, first under the leadership of George C. Marshall and then Dean Acheson, took the lead in formulating new policies. Further impetus came from the British, when they informed the Truman administration in February 1947 that they would have to terminate aid to Greece and Turkey, which precipitated the U.S. decision to ask Congress for military and economic assistance to those two nations. "Thus, it was a British action," Miscamble asserts, "rather than any initiative of an American official that forced the Truman administration to begin moving seriously beyond the confusion and contradictions of 1946."

That last observation is misleading. British initiatives did shape U.S. actions in Greece and Turkey in early 1947 and in Iran a year earlier. Yet Miscamble creates the impression that without British impetus U.S. policy would have remained indecisive. In September 1946, the Truman administration, as Miscamble himself points out, was determined to thwart Soviet efforts to gain control of the Turkish straits, even at the risk of war. By February 1947, State Department officials were so concerned about Communist gains in the Greek civil war that they had decided to recommend the extension of U.S. military aid to the Greek government. The British announcement accelerated U.S. action but it was hardly responsible, by itself, for the toughening of U.S. policy. A year earlier, Bevin did indeed tell American officials that the United States "could not and must not stand aloof" while Soviet troops remained in Iran. (278) Yet State Department officials had already concluded that the continued Soviet military presence threatened Iran's sovereignty and independence and might lead to the establishment of the first Russian satellite outside Eastern Europe. American officials, in short, had their own reasons for following firm policies toward Soviet challenges in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

Miscamble's most significant achievement is his careful reconstruction of the "confusion, ambiguity, contradiction, and messiness" that sometimes prevailed as the Truman administration formulated its Soviet policies. He has refrained from using "the distinctive colors of black and white" when shades of gray prevailed. Although his understanding of policy making is complex and thoughtful, it is still somewhat narrow, even a bit myopic. In Miscamble's analysis, officials in the White House, State Department, and, occasionally, U.S. embassies play major roles. Members of Congress only infrequently enter the discussion. Miscamble rarely examines public attitudes toward foreign policy, either mass opinion

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expressed in polls or elite views in editorials, opinion pieces, or public speeches that might have influenced official thinking. He pays little, if any, attention to partisan discussions of foreign policy—disagreements between Democrats and Republicans or other evidence that political calculations might have affected foreign policy choices. Adding these dimensions would have made Miscamble's approach to policy making more nuanced and sophisticated. Indeed, they might have helped to explain why Truman sometimes devoted his attention to domestic, rather than foreign affairs or why administration officials did not move more quickly to confront the Soviet Union, something Miscamble believed the administration ought to have done.

One final point. Miscamble does not shrink from moral judgments. In fact, he considers moral evaluation an essential part of the historian's task. Miscamble has strong views about the evilness of Stalin's leadership, and he minces no words in his denunciations of academics who fail to share his view of Soviet responsibility for the Cold War. His judgments will rankle, even outrage some readers; they will please or satisfy others. Yet whatever one's reactions to his moral reckonings, it's still possible to appreciate Miscamble's significant historical achievements. He has breathed life into old questions about the emergence of U.S. Cold War policies and has offered a different, even iconoclastic view of Truman's role in his own administration's foreign policy. Those are no small accomplishments, even if the overall story is still awfully familiar.

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