From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review

Reviewed Work:


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Wilson Miscamble has written an intriguing book, not least because he tells two stories, or rather one story on two levels. On one level Miscamble displays his talents as an astute scholar. He offers a detailed, thoughtful contribution to enduring historiographical issues: What foreign policy legacy did Franklin D. Roosevelt bequeath to Harry S Truman? Was there a sharp break between Roosevelt and Truman that helped bring on the Cold War? Was there a reasonable chance to sustain at least rough cooperation with the Soviets in the postwar period? Miscamble argues that Roosevelt left Truman a nebulous policy based on unrealistic hopes of postwar cooperation with the Soviets. He suggests that Truman tried hard to continue Roosevelt's policies, but was hampered by deficiencies in FDR's design and by Joseph Stalin's unwillingness to cooperate. Stalin made a Cold War nearly inevitable. Though this thesis can be challenged (and supported) in many particulars, I will focus largely on the second, moralized level of the story. On this level, Stalin appears as a monster, the Soviet Union is unrelievedly "vile," the United States and its allies invariably good, and even Nazi Germany escapes without too much condemnation. (51, 82, passim).

I restrict my review to Miscamble's interpretation of Roosevelt and Roosevelt's policies because they constitute the standard against which the author measures Truman and his policies. Authors deserve to write the books they want with the perspectives and values they hold dear. I still wish, however, that Miscamble's treatment of Roosevelt had done more to fulfill his stated aim of "avoid[ing] simply reading history backwards and writing of Truman's foreign policy in light of subsequent Cold War events." (xiii) In this review I will examine three ways in which Miscamble actually does read the history of Roosevelt's "foreign policy in light of subsequent Cold War events." First, he interprets Roosevelt's policies and aspirations regarding the Soviet Union through an interpretive lens that views as essential the Manichean ideological conflict that began in 1917 and intensified in the Cold War. A part of this view is an unrelenting condemnation of the Soviet Union. Second, despite Miscamble's admirable archival research, he relies too much and too uncritically on
impressionistic, Cold-War era sources. Third, the author, with a degree of intentionality impossible to discern, represents Roosevelt in ways that revive early Cold War polemics about U.S. leaders lacking the masculine toughness necessary to deal with Joseph Stalin.

Miscamble is correct and justified in condemning Stalin’s “ruthless violence and ferocious internal repression.” (49) Yet his lengthy, repeated iterations of Soviet iniquities, give parts of the book the feel of an early 1950s tract. To put it another way, the author, like many State Department officials of the 1930s-50s, seems to have accepted the Riga axioms as a given. Miscamble’s condemnation of the Soviets is especially striking because it is not matched by similar criticism of the Nazi Germany wartime enemy. Consider, for instance, the explanation of Truman’s “rather flippant comment” in June 1941 that “if we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany and that way let them kill as many as possible, although I don’t want to see Hitler victorious under any circumstances.” (17) Miscamble is convincing in downplaying the significance of Truman’s remark because the senator still supported Lend-Lease and the subsequent alliance with Moscow. What is telling, however, is that the author utilizes Truman’s comment as the opportunity for a half-page description of “the tragic consequences of Stalin’s horrendous rule.” Truman figures only incidentally in sentences that go on about “the horrors of collectivization nor of the terrors and the purges . . . . [Truman] never developed any woolly-headed and morally obtuse sympathy for the Soviet experiment – if that is the terms for that sad tyranny.” (18) The Soviet tyranny was sad and horrible. Yet Miscamble does not balance his criticism of the Soviets with parallel, emotionally laden criticism of the Nazi system. In 1941-45, it was the horrors and the aggressiveness of the Nazi system that stood forefront in FDR’s mind – and in Truman’s, for that matter. Instead of describing the wartime enemy, the author utilizes William Langer and Everett Gleason’s Cold-War era formulation of “the totalitarian threat” of the “two hated dictatorships.” (18) A reader might question why the U.S. fought Germany instead of the Soviet Union.

Miscamble merits applause for his extensive archival research. He looked at a huge variety of sources from the Roosevelt and Truman libraries, the U.S. National Archives, Library of Congress, Public Record Office, and various other archives. It is puzzling, therefore, why he relies so heavily on testimony from Cold-War era observers writing about 1941-46. Surely the position and Cold-War perspective of these writers influenced their judgments. Though these opinions may have utility, they need to be appraised in terms of the writers’ experiences, agendas, and access to primary source documents.

Quoting from questionable sources is especially a problem as Miscamble recycles the old charge that Roosevelt naively and inappropriately trusted Stalin. For instance, he cites a supposed recollection of William Bullitt in 1948. In a LIFE article, Bullitt claimed that FDR had told him in August 1943: “I think that if I give [Stalin] everything I possibly can and ask nothing in return, noblesse oblige, he won’t try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace.” (52). According to Bullitt, FDR was irresponsibly giving “everything I possibly can” in return for the dictator’s unlikely commitment to democracy and peace. But where is the evidence that FDR actually said this? Bullitt
habitually wrote or dictated a memorandum of conversation following every talk he had with the President. There is, however, no evidence in either Bullitt’s published or unpublished papers that this conversation, and especially these words, were ever uttered.\(^1\) Indeed, by August 1943 FDR was bent on tormenting Bullitt. The erstwhile ambassador to Moscow had forced the firing of FDR’s chief aide in the state department, Sumner Welles, by spreading throughout Washington the true story that Welles had a history of soliciting sex from African American train porters. For the rest of his life, Bullitt resented FDR for having ostracized him and side-tracked his career. Bullitt crafted the title of his 1948 *LIFE* article to point up both his Cold-War credentials and FDR’s failures: “How We Won the War and Lost the Peace.” (52) Bullitt’s lesson and, by extension, Miscamble’s is clear: FDR’s supposed naiveté helped squander victory.

Miscamble also relies on sources that are neither primary nor expert. For instance, he finds “astute” Max Lerner’s retrospective judgment that FDR sought to “trust the Russians and win their trust in return.” (48) Yet what were Lerner’s credentials for arriving at this judgment? Though Lerner had a distinguished career as *PM* and *New York Post* columnist and as author of fifteen books including *America as a Civilization*, he never studied close-up either FDR or Soviet-Americans wartime relations. Lerner lacked the credentials necessary, as either a scholar or an insider, to discern what the Rooseveltian “sphinx” intended toward the Russians. Rather than Lerner, who observed from afar, or Bullitt, who grew furious at Roosevelt, we might seek the appraisal of an insider, Walter Lippmann. For much of the 20th century, Lippmann enjoyed unique access to the White House, the executive departments, Congress, the high court, the military brass, and foreign embassies. He saw FDR close up, and criticized him, for more than a dozen years. In Lippmann’s judgment, “Roosevelt was a cynical man. What he thought he could do was outwit Stalin.”\(^2\) Outwitting Stalin did not, of course, preclude trusting him to a degree and leading him toward a broader understanding of Soviet and Allied interests. An insider of a different sort was FDR’s distant relative and companion, Margaret “Daisy” Suckley. In the last eighteen months of his life, an often-lonely Roosevelt confided to Suckley his thoughts about the postwar world. Years later she remembered FDR’s stressing two things about Stalin, first that Roosevelt “had to get-at” the dictator. The second matter related to trust. “Do you think you could trust him?” she asked. According to Suckley, Roosevelt responded with a laugh, “Oh, no. If I did something Stalin did not approve of, he’d stab me in the back.”\(^3\) Roosevelt remained a realist – and a visionary. Roosevelt did suffer some wishful

1. Orville H. Bullitt (ed.), *For the President Personal and Secret* (Boston, 1972). Bullitt’s August 1943 memorandum to FDR warning about Stalin’s designs is on 595-99. There is no indication of any reply or conversation. Bullitt’s memoranda of conversations with the President are in Yale University, Sterling library, William C. Bullitt papers, box 73. For Bullitt and Welles, see Irwin Gellman, *Secret Affairs* (New York: Enigma Books, 2002).

2. Walter Lippmann oral history, Columbia University, Butler library, 217.

thinking. Yet his experience had also taught him that if he kept persevering toward his goal, he might well end up nearby.

A prime example of the two levels in this book centers on how FDR’s qualities as a leader affected his treatment of the Soviets. On one level, Miscamble deftly analyzes the complex ambiguity in FDR’s attitudes and policies. Yet he is also intent on telling a simpler tale, more disturbing in several ways.

Many authors, mostly recently Mary E. Glantz in 2005, have described the divergent opinions held by Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, on the one hand, and by the U.S. representatives in Moscow, on the other hand.4 The representatives in Moscow included ambassadors Laurence Steinhardt and W. Averell Harriman and military attaches Ivan Yeaton and Joseph Michela. Miscamble is distinctive among recent scholars in implying that the divergent opinions stemmed from not merely differences in policy, but also from Roosevelt’s deficiencies in masculinity and morality. He lauds Steinhardt and Yeaton as “tough-minded critics” of the Soviet Union. Steinhardt “had realist blood in his veins.” (49-50). Unfortunately, however, Steinhardt’s “realist blood” did not suffice to keep him calm and steady at his difficult post. He complained that working in the Moscow embassy amounted to “solitary confinement under unspeakable living conditions.” It was “enough to get on anyone’s nerves.”5 His nerves grew worse after Barbarossa. Beginning four days after the German onslaught, Steinhardt repeatedly pressed Washington, his British colleagues, and the Soviet government to plan for evacuation of the U.S. embassy. Meanwhile, Yeaton’s “genuine and tough-minded expertise,” remained based, according to other attaches, on his total reliance on German radio reports. (50-51) Even after Steinhardt himself realized that the Soviets would resist, Yeaton’s reports to Washington continued to predict imminent Soviet collapse.6 Miscamble lauds Steinhardt and Yeaton for urging Washington to aid Moscow only on a “reciprocity approach.” (51, 50) According to the warped “reciprocity” thesis, the fact that Red Army soldiers were dying by the millions in fighting the Wehrmacht did not add up to sufficient payment for generous Lend Lease aid.

In emotionally evocative language, Miscamble represents Roosevelt as lacking the perceptiveness, restraint, and judgment needed in a leader manly enough to stand up to Stalin. Though Miscamble’s authorial intent remains impossible to discern, his rhetorical strategy speaks for itself. In his book, published in 2007, Miscamble cites a 1961 essay by George F. Kennan and a 1971 book by Adam Ulam to establish that Stalin’s policies in 1939-41 amounted to “craven actions” – while ignoring archivally-based work by Gabriel


6. For Steinhardt and Yeaton, see Glantz, FDR and the Soviet Union, 48-70.
Gorodetsky (1999), Michael Carley (2000), Constantine Pleshakov (2005), and David Murphy (2005). Then, in a fusillade of descriptors, Miscamble depicts Roosevelt as taking “a benign interpretation” of the Soviets. He goes on: Stalin’s “perfidy” never “registered fully with him. He never gauged . . . .” Roosevelt lacked not only perception but also the rationality and restraint necessary in a manly leader: “An unsentimental appreciation of [Stalin’s] craven actions never served as a break on or even a cautionary guide for American policy as he set about to work with Stalin.” (49) FDR failed to see Stalin’s domestic brutality as “cause for restraint.” (49) Miscamble suggests that lack of restraint could lead to dangerous, inappropriate relationships. In a fascinating sentence, richer in innuendo than in evidence, he writes: “It must surely be said that [Roosevelt] flirted at least with something of the romance of many Western intellectuals regarding the Soviet experiment.” (49) Letting go essential barriers, “the president even proved quite relaxed in the face of warnings of Soviet espionage efforts to penetrate his administration.” (49) Unable to protect the nation himself, FDR aggravated matters by holding “tough-minded critics of the Soviet Union largely at arm’s length.” [sic] (49)

In another purple paragraph, Miscamble first asserts that “in reality, of course, Hitler had left Stalin few options but to fight to the death.” (53) In 1941-44, this “reality” would have come as welcome news to the wide range of U.S. and British diplomats and leaders who had reason to fear a separate Soviet-German peace. Miscamble’s readers again see Roosevelt as inappropriately eager to get along with Stalin and as unseeing. FDR was “unstinting in his efforts,” “expended his energies,” and he gave “soothing reassurances.” (53) He also “downplayed or simply failed to appreciate the ideological chasm”; he “largely ignored”; “he refrained.” All this “complaisance . . . . rested upon the tragic misperception that he could build a bond of friendship with his Soviet opposite.” (53)

The author goes on in this vein. He depicts Roosevelt at the Teheran Conference as teasing Churchill “with all the good sense of an immature male trying to impress a member of the opposite sex” – in this case, Stalin. (55). Roosevelt appears in this book as the President with an “enduring commitment to a supine cooperation with the Soviet Union.” (68).

So what? So what if Miscamble uses colorful prose and at times takes a moralistic approach? As I acknowledged at the beginning of this review, every author has the right to write his or her book as he or she likes. But it is also the responsibility of reviewers to point up how the metaphors and other rhetorical strategies of a book can convey a message apart from, or less scholarly than, the author’s principal thesis. In terms of the usual discourse of book reviews, there is much in this book that I agree with and much that I would dispute. One can always disagree with the interpretation of this event or of that document. What I have tried to do, however, in this brief review is to address less often

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considered issues of tone or register. In this in many ways admirable book, Miscamble aims to redress the “overly simplified view of Truman” and to present “a clear grasp of the legacy that FDR bequeathed to Truman.” (xiv) These worthy aims are, however, undercut by his overly simplified view of Roosevelt. Finally, in this post-Cold War era it seems like unfortunate reversion to use emotional language and innuendo to revive, whether intentionally or not, early Cold-War imputations that insufficiently manly U.S. leaders behaved disgracefully in their dealings with Stalin.