From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review

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Wilson Miscamble’s fine book is traditional in approach but not in its arguments. It is traditional in focusing on what the top decision-makers were thinking, saying, and doing. Race, class, and gender do not appear, and cultural studies methods are not deployed. Old-fashioned perhaps, but since Miscamble is studying the origins and evolution of U.S. foreign policy under Truman in 1945 and 1946, not necessarily inappropriate. Indeed, it is not clear that the more currently popular approaches could address his questions.

Miscamble also sails into the prevailing winds of historical sentiment in his central argument that FDR was naive in his attitudes towards Stalin and the USSR, that Truman maintained this stance well into 1946, and that Truman was vacillating and inconsistent for much longer than many scholars believe. For Miscamble, what is striking is not that Truman abandoned FDR’s policy, but that he sought to maintain it for so long in the face of such unpromising Soviet behavior. Although at several points Truman lost his patience with Stalin, he soon regained it and continued his quest for agreements and understandings, a policy he abandoned only in 1947.

In his portrait of Truman and, to a lesser extent, FDR, Miscamble breaks new ground in some areas and in several others provides more detailed evidence and careful argument in the service of claims previously noted by others. In the former category, and crucial to his general argument, Miscamble shows that in his first six months in office Truman relied heavily on the counsel of Joseph Davies, FDR’s ambassador to Moscow in the 1930s and a strong -- some would say notorious -- supporter of conciliating the Soviet Union. Miscamble exaggerates only slightly when he says that Davies “has been
treated rather like some disgraced Soviet figure airbrushed out of official photos for fear his presence might contaminate the reputation of the remaining subject” (p. 136). Although sometimes he relies a bit uncritically on Davies’s diaries to establish the influence that Davies ascribes to himself (pp. 137-38), he establishes beyond a reasonable doubt that Truman valued Davies’s counsel and often followed it and that Davies in turn approved of what the president did, at least until the end of 1946. Since the photographs of Potsdam have not been literally airbrushed, one can see that Davies was one of the four people Truman brought to the table. This provides crucial support for Miscamble’s central argument that Truman did not quickly adopt a “hard line,” as both Truman and many of his revisionist critics would have us believe.

In an area as heavily researched as the start of the Cold War it is neither surprising nor alarming that on many other questions Miscamble finds forerunners. But the depth of his documentation and care of his arguments means that he does far more than repeat what others have said. In this category I would put his claim that FDR was not in the process of abandoning his conciliatory policy when he died. Of course it is notoriously difficult to fathom Roosevelt’s plans and expectations, but I think Miscamble has put the ball back into the court of those who would argue for a fundamental shift. Miscamble also shows Truman’s ad hoc, confused, and often desultory style of foreign-policy making. (Nevertheless, I do not think it is only reading today’s newspapers that leads to amazement at the number of complex policies put in motion relatively smoothly and carried out relatively well. Ironically, the vast increase in the size of the foreign policy apparatus may make it much harder now to carry out an agile and consistent foreign policy.) Quite contrary to the image he wanted to project at the time and later, Truman usually was not decisive. More strikingly, he often was not present. He delegated much more to his subordinates than many presidents did, and he rarely questioned them critically. Relatedly, more than is true in some accounts, Miscamble is fully aware of the extent to which Truman was overloaded if not overwhelmed in this period and whenever possible sought to concentrate on domestic policy and politics.

More substantively, Miscamble stresses that Truman broke with James Byrnes, the Secretary of State he appointed and relied on so heavily, not because Byrnes was too “soft” on the Soviet Union, but because he showed insufficient respect for the president. This point figures heavily in the story because it means that Truman’s turn against Byrnes does not show that he was rejecting Byrnes’s policies. Indeed, Truman’s progression from conciliation to containment (the terms oversimplify, I know) was not direct and unidirectional. Instead, Miscamble adds weight to the argument previously made by Deborah Larson that at least until early 1947 Truman vacillated, sometimes offering concessions and at other times refusing to yield. Over time, the policy drifted toward the latter, but the progression was not smooth.

Miscamble gives a full chapter to the decision to use atomic bombs against Japan. Although this interrupts the narrative a bit, the topic is so important and contested that the price is worth paying. He makes a strong defense of Truman’s actions, arguing that it is hard to imagine FDR or indeed any American president doing otherwise. The critics slight the
context of the long and bitter Pacific war and the understandable priority Truman placed on ending it as quickly as possible at the lowest possible cost of American lives. Miscamble convincingly argues that the critics also fail to understand that an earlier expression of the willingness to allow the Emperor to keep his throne would not have brought peace and that any alternative policy would have exacted a higher cost in the lives not only of Americans, but also of Chinese and Japanese. In fact, and here Miscamble builds on Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s recent book (although rejecting many of its main arguments), without a prompt surrender, Stalin would have seized northern Hokkaido (p. 240). Of course there will be no last word in these arguments, but I think Miscamble does a fine job of putting into their proper context several of the phrases and sentences found in primary sources such as Truman’s diary on which some scholars place excessive weight.

Let me take up a few issues that are of particular interest to international relations (IR) scholars as well as to historians. One is the claim for the continuity between FDR and Truman. Although proof or disproof must lie in the careful analysis of U.S. policy, two points arise from a broader social science perspective. First, the very fact that Truman had little independent domestic support and followed a president of towering stature meant that it would have been difficult for him to have diverged from what people felt was FDR’s policy even if he wanted to. He not only felt a moral obligation to continue his predecessor’s legacy, this was a political imperative. Until he had a chance to develop his own domestic support and until memories of FDR faded a bit, he would be vulnerable to charges of moving off Roosevelt’s path. Of course, Truman was not powerless here, and he could frame his actions as being consistent with FDR’s even if they were not. But this would be difficult terrain. Second, just as historians debate the relative impact of individuals and the situation, so IR scholars are concerned with the “level of analysis” problem—i.e., the question of whether the main determinants of a state’s foreign policy lie in the realm of the decision-making, domestic politics, or the external environment. Realists stress the latter, and so are prone to denigrate the importance of individuals. The stress on the importance of the external environment naturally goes along with the Realist claim that there is only a reduced range of choice in foreign policy, and that issues of morality do not arise. Miscamble’s position straddles the IR schools of thought, as do the views of many historians. Although he stresses the continuity between FDR and Truman, he also asserts that a different leader might well have behaved differently. A more perceptive and realistic statesman would have bargained harder with the USSR; someone whose outlook and style differed from Truman’s might have continued to conciliate the Soviet Union for a longer period.

Although the claim that Truman quickly abandoned FDR’s policy of conciliation is associated with some scholars on the left, most notably Gar Alperovitz, it is no accident that among those who have most vehemently rejected this thesis are Marxist scholars. The reason gets back to levels of analysis: Marxism says that a state’s foreign policy is deeply rooted in its domestic political system and that the U.S. had to try to push communism back and keep the world open for capitalist penetration if it was to maintain capitalism at home. This meant not that presidents took orders from Wall Street, but that these economic and political imperatives bore down on all American presidents. To argue that Truman made a
significant difference is to say that if FDR had lived the Cold War might have been avoided. It is hard to maintain this view within a Marxist framework. This is not to say that Marxists are uniquely close-minded. Theories are necessary if we are to interpret events and make sense of our world, and logic as well as psychology means that we will not discard what we think is a well established theory just because someone can propose a counterfactual that, by its very nature, cannot be fully supported by hard evidence (i.e., that FDR would have behaved very differently than Truman did).

At the risk of over-simplification (mine, not Miscamble’s), I think we can draw from his narrative an account of U.S. policy moving through three stages. FDR “rather naively...relied on his hunches and intuitions and held the hope that he could civilize or domesticate the Soviet ‘beast’ and establish a personal connection with Stalin” (p. 323). Envisioning the great powers forming something like a concert system that would keep the U.S. in world affairs without requiring it to maintain troops in Europe, he worried as much about conflict with Great Britain as with the USSR, and he replied to William Bullitt’s 1943 warning about Soviet ambitions by saying: “I have a hunch that Stalin is not that kind of man. Harry [Hopkins] says he’s not and that he doesn’t want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing from him in return, noblesse oblige, he won’t try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace” (p. 52). Although Truman had less faith in his ability to strike a close personal relationship with Stalin, he maintained this stance through much of 1946. But it was mixed with the approach best associated with Byrnes, whose background inclined him toward bargaining, reciprocity, and horse-trading, and who famously explained that we could and should deal with the Soviets the way Senators deal with each other: “you build a post office in their state, and they’ll build a post office in our state” (p. 214). So it is not surprising that it was Byrnes who broke the deadlock at Potsdam, and did so by proposing a bargain across several issues. Confirming the analyses of Marc Trachtenberg and James McAllister, Miscamble sees Byrnes as also seeking ways to reduce conflict by eliminating the need for joint decisions when working together appeared too difficult, as on the crucial issues of reparations and the governing of Germany.

Unlike FDR, Byrnes demanded quid pro quos and bargained hard. But he still envisioned this as bargaining similar to that in domestic politics; one or two stray remarks to the contrary, he did not employ coercion or doubt the possibility of a constructive if not harmonious relationship. By the end of 1946, the deadlocks in the Council of Foreign Ministers meetings, the rejection of his proposals for German disarmament and demilitarization that Byrnes believed would provide for Soviet security, Soviet repression in East Europe, and the pressures on Turkey and Iran (discussed only in passing by Miscamble) led Byrnes and Truman to shift more toward containment, a stance that aimed at building up positions of strength, had few expectations for productive bargains, and stopped searching for solutions that were in both sides’ interest. I think one could add a fourth phase, symbolized by the adoption of NSC 4a (December 1947), 10/2 (June 1948), and 20/4 (November 1948) that involved a more offensive posture in the belief that a long-run Cold War could not be sustained because it would lead either to a shooting war or to American collapse, and that the Soviet regime had to be undermined.
The obvious question is what caused these shifts. I think one can infer from Miscamble’s account that the first one was caused less by changes in Soviet behavior than by Truman’s decision to replace Edward Stettinius, who Acheson described as someone who “had gone far with comparatively modest equipment” (p. 96), with Byrnes. In doing so, Truman was calling on a smart and experienced political leader, and Miscamble reminds us that he wanted someone who had held elective office to be next in the line of succession. What is striking is that “substantive policy issues played virtually no part” (p. 96) in the decision, which means that the shift to a stance of bargaining and reciprocity came not because Truman’s beliefs and preferences had changed, but because this came along with the person he selected to run his foreign policy. Although startling from the common picture of aides being chosen because they mirror the president’s values and politics, in fact this is not so unusual. To take a contemporary case, the selection of L. Paul Bremer to take charge in Baghdad was highly consequential, leading to a number of choices such as disbanding the Iraqi army. But it does not appear that Bremer was chosen because he had these views.

The shift from bargaining to containment and from containment to a more offensive stance was much more driven by Truman’s increasing disillusion with Stalin and the Soviet Union. One crucial question here is exactly what Soviet behavior led to the change. Unfortunately for scholars, the impact of various events is hard to disentangle. The urgings of the British and especially Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin were important, and it appears to have been the combination of Soviet activities and pressures that took such a toll. Any one of them might have been seen as the occasion for further bargaining, but together they generated the impression that Stalin could only be stopped by firmness and threats, and that bargains would not be stable unless they were backed by possible coercion.

Miscamble agrees with many other scholars that for Truman, and to a lesser extent for Byrnes, a central “test” was whether Stalin would “keep his word,” to use a phrase that was common for Truman. The president had worked with many distasteful characters in his career, especially Missouri boss Tom Pendergast, and had come to believe that arrangements with them were possible as long as they kept their word, as he believed that Pendergast had. So the perceptions that Stalin was reneging on agreements carried great weight for him. In this he was not hypocritical, or at least was not entirely so. One reason why he rebuffed Churchill’s suggestion that the Allies should not withdraw from their advanced positions in Germany without gaining concessions from Stalin was the belief that doing so would break FDR’s pledges (pp. 138, 166). I think this also helps explain why Truman and others were so alarmed at the tightening of Soviet control in Eastern Europe. At one level, the fear makes no sense: why should Soviet repression in Eastern Europe lead to the fear that the Soviets would seek to expand elsewhere? Part of the answer of course is that this is not all that the Soviets were doing, and the combination of their activities was alarming. Part also lies in the association of domestic repression with foreign aggression, an association greatly heightened by the experience of Hitler. But part also is that the Soviets were seen as breaking their word, and American (and other) observers inferred that a country that broke its word in one area could not be trusted in others.
It would help here if IR scholars could bring to bear a rich and rigorous body of scholarship dealing with threat perception. The question of the conditions that lead states to perceive threats is obviously a central one, and we find lots of cases of over-perception and under-perception of threats. But we do not have much good social science to draw on, and so rather than review the fairly small literature let me pass on to another question about East Europe. Miscamble’s account confirms the view that FDR and Truman expected and accepted some sort of Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. The Soviets, after all, did have legitimate security interests. Although Miscamble does not discuss this in detail, I think what is crucial is that they expected this sphere to be a “soft” or “open” one. The Soviets would be the leading state and would see that these countries did not adopt unacceptable foreign policies, but there would be relatively free domestic political competition. What was not expected was the hardening of the Soviet sphere (pp. 39, 67, 212-14, 255, 271, 274, 291-2). Several questions can be raised, but the one I think is particularly central is whether soft spheres were ever possible. I join Miscamble in doubting it. Anything like the free play of domestic competition in Eastern Europe would have been likely to produce governments that were anti-Communist and anti-Soviet. These countries did not have the attitudes, institutions, and discipline that would have permitted stable Finlandization. What FDR and others expected was then an illusion. Since Stalin was no fool and it is particularly hard for even a more empathetic person than he to understand other’s illusions, he probably believed that when the U.S. and Britain agreed to his sphere, they knew what it would entail. Their protests and professions of shock therefore could not be sincere and instead signaled their threatening ambitions.

In Eastern Europe and elsewhere, I would have liked Miscamble to have said more about American and British intelligence, both in the analyses of the USSR and in the development of covert activities. Although the latter grew mainly in the years after Miscamble’s account, Eduard Mark’s important article that Miscamble uses for part of his story shows significant American activities in 1946.

This goes to a broader point. As Miscamble says, his “study unashamedly is Washington-centered and, to a significant extent, White House-centered” (p. xii). In one way, this is perfectly legitimate. No history can cover everything, and Miscamble’s purpose is to explain Truman’s policy. The difficulty is that Truman saw objectionable Soviet behavior as unprovoked and therefore as indicating malign intentions. Although on balance I agree with Miscamble, he fails to take account of what the U.S. was doing in the field. Anything beyond Truman’s vision is excluded from Miscamble’s. And a great deal was excluded from Truman’s sight because, as Miscamble has shown, he delegated a great deal and did not display much curiosity. The American stance in Germany that diverged from the Potsdam understanding and American covert actions in Eastern Europe could have produced responses that Truman would see as unprovoked. If something like this occurred -- and obviously this picks up on central arguments about the origins of the Cold War -- then while in some sense Miscamble’s account explains Truman’s perceptions and policies, it jumps too soon to the conclusion that Truman’s views were correct.
Miscamble makes no bones about the fact that this is what he does believe. Stalin was inherently aggressive; FDR’s policies that Truman followed at first were doomed and misguided; Byrnes’s bargaining stance was an improvement, but still insufficient; and only containment if not a more offensive stance could protect Europe and American security. The difficulty is that Miscamble cannot fully establish these positions without more analysis of the possible impact of American policies. For example, Stalin did not have to be paranoid to view the Baruch Plan, and perhaps even the Acheson-Lillienthal variant out of which is grew, as unacceptable. More generally, even though I think the balance of evidence is on Miscamble’s side, serious alternative views of Stalin are possible and I would dissent from his degree of certainty. Although a Washington-centered account can tell us a great deal, it cannot come to grips with questions of this sort.

As a Catholic priest who has served as Rector of Moreau Seminary at Notre Dame, Miscamble thoughtfully engages with a number of the moral issues raised by his history. They come up most centrally in the treatment of Hiroshima, but frame and set the tone for much of his discussion. His general perspective is I think quite admirable. He avoids cheap moralizing, which is unfortunately common, and empathizes with the dilemmas faced by decision-makers while still being able to step back and offer critical judgments. Like the “classical” realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, Miscamble understands that politics, especially international politics, inevitably involves not only dealing with but doing evil. Even the best policy involves inflicting harm on innocents. Scholars who fail to understand this are merely harmlessly sanctimonious, but decision-makers who fool themselves on this score pursue psychological peace of mind at the cost of effective and moral policies. Miscamble then has sympathy with George Kennan’s objection to the American acquiescence to Soviet domination of East Europe. When Hopkins queried him on his opposition to the arrangements in Poland, Kennan agreed that while the U.S. could not prevent this outcome, neither should it formally agree. Hopkins found this puzzling and asked Kennan, “[T]hen you think it’s just sin and we should be agin it?” Kennan agreed, and Hopkins replied: “I respect your opinion but I am not at liberty to accept it” (p. 158). One can still debate who was right, but the tension is an unavoidable part of statecraft.

This perspective also sheds a somewhat different light on Miscamble’s criticism of FDR and the early Truman for having naively conciliated the USSR in the face of its obvious evil and expansionism. Miscamble is right that the U.S. had alternatives: “A politician as devious and deft as Roosevelt would have been able to apply quid pro quo tactics with rare skill if he had chosen and as his ambassadors as Steinhart and Harriman regularly recommended” (p. 80). But on his penultimate page, Miscamble quotes Churchill’s moving eulogy for Neville Chamberlain: “it is not given to human beings...to foresee and predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events. In one phase men seem to have been right, and in another they seem to have been wrong” (p. 331). Even if Miscamble is correct that Stalin could not have been conciliated and a tougher policy would have produced better results, it can be argued that this could not have been known at the time. There was good reason for Roosevelt to believe that a harsh stance would sacrifice the possibility for harmonious post-war relations, sour the American public on internationalism and the idea of the United
Nations, and endanger the peace. There was a chance that his approach would work, and even if he overestimated the probability of success, it may have made sense to act as he did. In the last message that FDR personally drafted, he rejected the advice of Harriman and Churchill to vehemently protest Stalin’s charges of American bad faith in the negotiations for the surrender of German forces in northern Italy (“the Berne Incident”). When Harriman queried FDR’s use of the word “minor” to describe the incident, Roosevelt replied “I do not wish to delete the word ‘minor’ as it is my desire to consider the Berne misunderstanding a minor incident.” He similarly wrote Churchill that “I would minimize the general Soviet problem as much as possible because these problems in one form or another, seem to arise every day and most of them straighten out as in the case of the Berne meeting” (p. 78). FDR may have been wrong, but to have behaved otherwise would have been to forfeit the chance for a better world, and this gamble may have been worth taking. The policies of Roosevelt and the early Truman administration may then have been both deeply flawed and moral.