

## From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review



Reviewed Work:

**Wilson D. Miscamble.** *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War.* Cambridge, England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 414 pp. ISBN-13: 9780521862448 | ISBN-10: 0521862442.

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**Review by David S. Painter, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University**

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*Revised version, published on 12 September 2007, to include missing footnotes*

In the preface to his study of the first year and a half of the Cold War, Wilson Miscamble argues that historians should still care strongly about the origins of the Cold War because of “the moral and political stakes involved in the Cold War, its enormous impact on the postwar world, and its implications for the present...” (xvi). Less temperately, he argues later in the book “the time has come to drive the stake finally and completely through the heart of the false accusation that Truman quickly reversed Roosevelt’s accommodating approach” [to the Soviet Union] (171). This view, he charges in the conclusion, “is not supported by the evidence but rather was based upon a quicksand of faulty assumptions and misused tissues of evidence” (323).

**David Painter** is Associate Professor of History at Georgetown University. He holds degrees from King College, Oxford University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Ph.D, 1982). He teaches U.S. diplomatic history and international history and is Director of the Master of Arts in Global, International, and Comparative History program. His major publications include *The Cold War: An International History* (1999), and *Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Oil Policy, 1941-1954* (1986). He also edited with Melvyn P. Leffler, *Origins of the Cold War: An International History* (1994, 2005). Professor Painter’s research focuses on the political economy of U.S. foreign relations, the Cold War, and U.S. policy toward the Third World. He is currently working on a book-length project on oil and world power in the 20th century as well as a number of smaller projects including an analysis of oil and natural resources, 1945-62, for the Cambridge History of the Cold War.

*From Roosevelt to Truman* is not limited to setting the record straight on whether and when Truman reversed FDR’s policies toward the Soviet Union. Miscamble also believes that his “examination of Truman’s initial foreign policy sheds further light on the development of the Cold War conflict,” and “raises questions about the criticisms that revisionist scholars regularly aimed at the Truman administration for not persisting with the cooperative approach of Roosevelt” (325-26).

Unfortunately, the book’s conceptualization is too narrow to bear the weight of this larger goal of discrediting critical accounts of U.S. policy. Miscamble focuses almost exclusively on two issues -- Eastern Europe and the U.S. decision to use atomic bombs against Japan. He seems uninterested in the rest of the world: he barely mentions colonialism and racism; he does not deal with economic influences on U.S. foreign policy (a core revisionist argument); he does not examine internal conditions in other countries; and there is no analysis of geo-strategic concerns and objectives of the United States, the Soviet Union, or Great Britain. Although Miscamble makes a good case that until some time in 1946 Truman and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes believed that they were continuing FDR’s policies toward the Soviet Union, his larger goal of refuting revisionism seems to have compromised his ability to analyze objectively Truman administration policy.

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After a chapter on Truman's life and career before 1945 based largely on secondary sources, Miscamble moves to FDR's wartime diplomacy, noting that "clarifying Roosevelt's hopes and plans for the postwar world is an obvious prerequisite for determining if Truman continued or reversed his policies" (xiv). Although he astutely criticizes FDR for not effectively communicating his central policy assumptions to anyone in his administration except, perhaps, Harry Hopkins (82, 83), Miscamble's account of FDR's diplomacy seems to be based largely on outdated critiques by British writers and neoconservative ideologues and on uncritical acceptance of the views of Winston Churchill and George Kennan.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Churchill and Kennan's views are treated as the last word on any subject that they address. These sources lead him to charge that FDR was naïve about the Soviet Union and to repeat the discredited myths that FDR "largely separated military objectives from political goals beyond the defeat of his Axis enemies," and that FDR "consistently refused to conceive of Soviet-American relations in terms of a military balance in Europe" (74). Scholars who disagree with these myths are dismissed as "Roosevelt defenders" (79-80).

In particular, Miscamble berates Roosevelt for not "saving" Poland. He never explains what the United States could have done to "save" Poland, however. The Soviets were bearing the brunt of the fighting against Hitler; Soviet armies would control Eastern Europe as a result of their war efforts; efforts to try to seize Eastern Europe were militarily unsound and could jeopardize the more important goal of consolidating control of Western Europe; such efforts would also risk losing Soviet assistance in defeating Japan. In short, Poland was not important enough to jeopardize these other goals. Later in the book (293), Miscamble admits that Eastern Europe was not vital to U.S. security, but this belated recognition does not play a role in his discussion of the issue during World War II.

Miscamble also fails to discuss British military intervention in Greece in late 1944. Warren Kimball has argued that the infamous percentages agreement between Churchill and Stalin was really a trade of Greece for Poland, a deal that Churchill reneged on after British forces had secured Greece. Kimball also points out that the United States privately approved of British intervention in Greece.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not Miscamble agrees with this argument, he should address it, not ignore it.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Mark A. Stoler, "A Half-Century of Conflict: Interpretations of US World War II Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 18 (Summer 1994): 375-403. On Roosevelt, see Geoffrey Roberts, "Why Roosevelt Was Right About Stalin," <http://hnn.us/articles/36194.html>. On Churchill's reliability as a source, see David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 2005). Miscamble cites John Harper's criticism of FDR, but ignores his equally, if not more, critical views of Kennan. John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, and Dean G. Acheson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Warren Kimball, "Naked Reverse Right: Roosevelt, Churchill, and Eastern Europe, from TOLSTOY to Yalta – and a Little Beyond," *Diplomatic History* 9 (Winter 1985): 1-24; reprinted in *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 159-83.

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As for U.S. strategy being insufficiently attentive to political considerations, the Western Allies ended up with all of Western Europe and two-thirds of Germany, including its most important industrial areas – at a very low cost in lives. In this regard, any assessment of alternative policies should compare U.S. and British war-related deaths of around 410,000 and 400,000 respectively with Soviet losses of 25-27 million.

Miscamble also should have considered the available options and the context. Two attempts by Germany to dominate Europe made it clear that a Germany strong enough to contain the Soviet Union was also strong enough to dominate Europe, and the Holocaust demonstrated what German domination could mean for the peoples of Europe and the world. In other words, before the successful test of the atomic bomb, the options for containing Soviet power were limited.

Unfortunately, Miscamble's discussion of FDR's policies on atomic weapons is incomplete and misleading. It is hard to get around the basic point that Martin Sherwin made many years ago: FDR may have envisioned a world run by Four Policemen, "but only two of them would have the bomb."<sup>3</sup> Miscamble tries to get around this by claiming that FDR wanted to share information on the Anglo-American atomic program with the Soviets. FDR may have talked about sharing information with the Soviets, but he never took any action to do so.

Miscamble ignores Anglo-American efforts to gain preclusive control of world supplies of uranium and thorium.<sup>4</sup> Although uranium is one of the most common elements in the earth's crust, large deposits of high-grade ore are relatively rare. During World War II, the United States and Great Britain set up an organization, the Combined Development Trust (CDT), to gain control of the world's supply of uranium and thorium. By the end of the war the CDT controlled an estimated 97 percent of world uranium production and 65 percent of the world supply of thorium.<sup>5</sup> U.S. forces also seized the bulk of existing German supplies of uranium and bombed facilities in Germany that processed uranium for the German atomic project. U.S. policymakers believed that Western control of uranium and thorium would delay, if not prevent, Soviet development of atomic weapons and would drastically limit the number of atomic weapons the Soviets could produce if they successfully tested a bomb.

One could argue that such efforts were prudent and necessary, but one cannot deny that the Soviets might regard them as hostile. As Sherwin demonstrated many years ago, taking

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<sup>3</sup> Martin J. Sherwin, "The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War, in *Origins of the Cold War: An International History*, Second Edition, Eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter (London: Routledge, 2005), 63. Sherwin's article was originally published in the *American Historical Review* 78 (October 1973): 945-68.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan E. Helmreich, *Gathering Rare Ores: The Diplomacy of Uranium Acquisition, 1943-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 174.

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Anglo-American policy on atomic weapons during World War II into account gives a very different view of FDR's policies from that held by Miscamble.

According to Miscamble, Truman tried to follow what he believed were FDR's policies toward the Soviet Union until the fall of 1946.<sup>6</sup> He begins his discussion of Truman by noting that the familiar story of Truman berating Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov over Poland cannot be supported from contemporary documents, as Geoffrey Roberts pointed out in a 2004 article.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear what this shows, however, except that Truman, like FDR, realized that clashing with the Soviets over Poland could jeopardize larger goals, such as Soviet assistance in the war against Japan.

Although Poland was not vital to U.S. security, Germany was. Miscamble's discussion of U.S. policy toward Germany ignores the implications of U.S. and British determination to limit German reparations. U.S. policy was not only self-interested, but also had a significant impact on Soviet security. The United States wanted to rebuild Germany in order to foster the recovery of the Europe and the world economy. In addition, the United States and Britain also did not want to be in the position of indirectly contributing to reparations for the Soviets by replacing resources the Soviets took as reparations. The Soviets, for sound historical reasons, saw an economically powerful Germany as a threat. Reparations from Germany would not only strengthen the Soviet economy, but would also help keep Germany weak. Moreover, without reparations from Germany, or aid from the United States, which was a non-starter, the Soviets had two options to obtain the resources they needed for reconstruction – they could take what they could from Eastern Europe, including their occupation zone in Germany, and/or sweat them out of their own people. In other words, U.S. policy on reparations had profound implications for the peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and for the origins of the Cold War, as Bruce Kuklick pointed out twenty-five years ago.<sup>8</sup>

Miscamble's discussion of the Potsdam conference plays down the extent to which possession of the atomic bomb influenced U.S. tactics. Among other things, the bomb meant that the Soviets were no longer needed to contain Germany. As for Japan, Miscamble seems to believe that refuting Gar Alperovitz's arguments about "atomic diplomacy" equals refuting revisionism. Most historians, including many revisionists, have long accepted the argument made years ago by Sherwin and Barton Bernstein that the United States used the

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<sup>6</sup> A key part of his evidence for this claim seems to be that Truman stayed in touch with, and, at times, listened to, FDR's former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph E. Davies, long a focus of conservative criticism of FDR's policies.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, "Sexing Up the Cold War: New Evidence on the Molotov-Truman Talks of April 1945," *Cold War History* 4 (April 2004): 105-25. Roberts' new study, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), appeared too late for him to consult, but he should have taken into account Roberts' other work on Soviet foreign policy.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Kuklick, *American Policy and the Division of Germany: The Clash with Russia over Reparations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

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atomic bomb to end the war with Japan quickly and to save American lives.<sup>9</sup> Most also recognize that the primary goal of ending the war quickly was not inconsistent with the goal of limiting Soviet gains -- the two goals were complementary; they were not mutually exclusive. Miscamble admits this when he writes in regard to Soviet plans to occupy the northern island of Hokkaido, "who knows how much they might have procured and at what cost to the Japanese people without the surrender the atomic bombs had forced" (240).

Miscamble's discussion of atomic diplomacy after Hiroshima also adds little to the literature. He does not address David Holloway's argument that the U.S. monopoly of atomic weapons made Stalin less likely to compromise for fear that compromise would be seen as weakness and would lead to further demands for concessions.<sup>10</sup> He also does not seem to understand that U.S. possession of the bomb stiffened Soviet determination to control Eastern Europe because of the increased need to extend defenses against air attack. In addition, his account of U.S. plans for control of atomic energy, a better issue with which to gauge the impact of the atomic bomb on the origins of the Cold War, misses most of the main issues.

Although earlier an advocate of "atomic diplomacy," Secretary of War Henry Stimson argued in September 1945 that the United States should talk directly with the Soviets about atomic weapons in order to reduce distrust. According to Stimson, the standard by which to judge cooperation with the Soviets was not whether the United State could prevent the Soviets from developing atomic weapons, something he did not believe feasible, but what would be the state of U.S.-Soviet relations when the Soviets did so.<sup>11</sup>

Truman, however, listened to other advice, and endorsed plans that sought to maintain the U.S. monopoly of atomic weapons as long as possible. Both the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan and the Baruch Plan called for control of world supplies of uranium and thorium by an international body. Without these elements, nations could not build atomic weapons. Both plans also provided that the United States would retain its atomic arsenal until an international control system was fully functioning to U.S. satisfaction. Baruch's Plan also called for sanctions for violations and for the permanent members of the Security Council to give up their veto on matters related to atomic energy. These provisions would preserve

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<sup>9</sup> See J. Samuel Walker's valuable historiographical essays, the most recent of which is "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29 (April 2005): 311-34, and his succinct study, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan*, Revised Edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, chapter 12; abridged and reprinted in Leffler and Painter, eds., *Origins of the Cold War*, 72-90.

<sup>11</sup> US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, 2: 40-44 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1967); McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988): 136-42.

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the U.S. atomic monopoly while preventing other nations from developing atomic weapons.<sup>12</sup>

Truman believed that the United States should maintain its monopoly over nuclear weapons until a foolproof system of control was in place. He wrote Baruch in July 1946, “we should not under any circumstances throw away our gun until we are sure the rest of the world can’t arm against us” (288). Truman’s view is understandable, but it is hardly evidence of a willingness to reach agreements with the Soviets. Truman’s position minimized the risks to the United States, increased the risks the Soviets and others had to take, and ensured that there was no international agreement to control nuclear weapons.

Due to word limits, I will not address the remainder of the book. In any event, as Miscamble notes, most of his discussion after 1946 is based on his earlier study of Kennan.<sup>13</sup> It is also largely uninformed by recent scholarship on such issues as the civil war in Greece and the economic and strategic implications of the Marshall Plan.

The final chapter also seeks to analyze the meaning of his findings for the larger history of the Cold War. Miscamble repeats his vigorous criticism of FDR’s diplomacy, argues that the Truman administration tried to continue cooperation with the Soviet Union until the fall of 1946, and celebrates uncritically the turn to a vigorous policy of containment. In polemical language ill-suited for an academic study, Miscamble condemns those who disagree with him, and claims “it is an undisguised travesty that Truman and his administration have been subjected to ill-founded criticism by many American academic historians who so easily shrug off the danger that Stalin and his system presented” (331-32).

In some respects, *From Roosevelt to Truman* represents a lost opportunity. A less jaundiced analysis of FDR’s policies might have led to a better-balanced perspective on the question of whether and when Truman abandoned FDR’s approach to the Soviet Union. Miscamble’s analysis of FDR’s diplomacy is central to his argument, however, and his account of Truman’s early policies is marked by the same flawed assumptions that shaped his views about Roosevelt. The result is a study that is not only too narrowly conceptualized but also too unbalanced in its judgments to offer much insight into the origins of the Cold War.

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<sup>12</sup> David S. Painter, *The Baruch Plan and the International Control of Atomic Energy* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Wilson D. Miscamble, *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).