



Review: Truman

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by Arnold Offner

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Truman: Cold War Hero or “Parochial Nationalist”?

Brendan G. Conway

Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945–1953, by Arnold Offner. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). 626 pp. \$28.

Few postwar presidents are as highly regarded today as Harry Truman. The defeat of Nazi Germany and fascist Japan, the founding of NATO, and the enactment of the Marshall Plan are all credited in whole or in part to Truman and his advisors. The Pax Americana begins with Truman at Potsdam. It begins with the new security architecture and institutions of the postwar era. For Democrats, Truman provides the model for an activist foreign policy untainted by Vietnam and McGovernism. For Republicans, Truman was the progenitor of containment and a pioneer of robust defense spending. Scholars are less effusive but hardly uncomplimentary. No matter that Truman was manifestly unpopular among his contemporaries; the consensus judgment on his legacy in world affairs is unmistakably positive.

This troubles diplomatic historian Arnold Offner, whose new study, *Another Such Victory*, takes wide aim at the Truman consensus. According to Offner, Truman was a “parochial nationalist,” whose presidency “created a rigid framework in which the United States waged long-term, extremely costly global Cold War.”¹ His tenure “narrowed Americans’ perception of the world political environment.” It “intensified Soviet-American conflict, hastened division of Europe, and brought tragic intervention in Asian civil wars and a generation of Sino-American enmity.”² The Cold War, Offner would have us believe, was a hollow, ephemeral victory that recalls the words of King Pyrrhus himself: “another such victory, and we are undone.” A classic is thus invoked to characterize contemporary world politics after the Cold War’s end.

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The argument is deeply contrarian, but hardly innovative. Left-leaning Cold War historians advanced it decades ago; pre-war isolationists on the right pioneered it before them. It sometimes appears as a species of realism: that is, based not upon normative reasoning but on allegedly positive grounds, upon cost-benefit analysis, or upon the proposition that the United States has over-committed itself and will be subject to the requisite blowback. Such arguments have their place in healthy public discourse. But the incarnation this study offers fails to reveal much that Melvyn Leffler's *A Preponderance of Power*³ did not already reveal years ago, in spite of drawing amply upon Truman's papers and those of his advisors. It misses opportunities by omitting use of new foreign sources and archival evidence that would cast greater light upon the many contentious claims the book advances about the nature of Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean intentions and diplomacy. In many respects the book is ten years too late, speaking to questions of the "post-Cold War era" that seem well trodden a full thirteen years after the Cold War's end.

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that Truman was a "parochial nationalist," which is the reigning theme of Offner's study. This is too slippery and too subjective a contention—not to mention wrong—to serve as a serious organizing principle. The several reasons advanced to support such a conclusion are simply not convincing.

First is Truman's alleged "uncritical belief in the superiority of American values and political-economic interests."⁴ Why his beliefs were "uncritical" is never shown, and is a dubious proposition. Truman shunned

intellectualism, but was no dupe. His tendencies toward plain speech and platitude are well documented, but the logical leap to equate elocution with intellect is the same mistake many contemporary commentators make with respect to George W. Bush. These days, even *New York Times* editorialists concede that Bush is a shrewd politician

and strategist who uses reigning perceptions and misperceptions to advance his administration's objectives. No doubt Truman was given to generalizations about the United States and the world that irritate the sensibilities of establishment historians like Offner. But historians themselves use a term to describe the intrusion of contemporary sentiment into historical analysis, "presentism," and the term is hardly complimentary.

The second criticism, closely related, is Truman's alleged "inability to comprehend Asian politics and nationalism." The plaint is ironic, for the basis of such comprehension in the United States today—the intimate relations between the United States and its major allies in Asia—owes largely to Truman. If Truman himself was ignorant of Asia, his actions ensured that future generations of Americans would be less so. There's the rub for Offner, who criticizes Truman for considering Korea a key "ideological battleground," and for allegedly rushing to war; and second, for "creating a framework for long-term counterrevolutionary policy toward the [People's Republic of China]."⁵ Among the oddities of Offner's arguments here, the Korean War is portrayed as a potentially limited internal affair, and Mao Zedong emerges as a reasonable and well-intentioned nationalist. Both are difficult for the contemporary observer to swallow—particularly the latter, what with so much available evidence regarding the extremism of Mao's rule. As to the former, Korea's importance may have been "overblown" in official circles, as Offner puts it, but the deterrent effect of the U.S. defense of South Korea upon future Chinese and Soviet behavior in Asia was substantial.

Offner's third, and most important criticism of Truman is his "conviction that the Soviet Union and Communism were the root cause of international strife."⁶ Truman was clearly an ardent anticommunist—there is no disagreement on this—but for Offner, this is a near tragedy. "No 'single master narrative' suffices to explain the Cold War,"⁷ he insists defensively, and proceeds to demonstrate why any observer sympathetic to Truman's anticommunism is wrong to think otherwise. The most memorable instance, Offner's comparison of Truman to former Vice President and Truman administration Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace—toward whom the author maintains a most favorable disposition—shows precisely why. Offner rousingly declares Wallace's foreign policy views to be "far more advanced" than Truman's, especially with respect to the "need for making social change abroad," and for "melding American power into multilateral institutions." It seems unfair to claim that the man who presided over the remaking of Germany and Japan

eschewed “social change abroad” rightly understood. Truman “increasingly viewed the Russians’ aggressive behavior as an extension of tsarism and bolshevism,”⁸

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Offner notes disapprovingly, while Wallace believed that the “Russian attitude in the Balkan states was not so greatly different from our attitude with regard to Mexico and Cuba.”⁹

Offner at least notes the persuasive cases (John Lewis Gaddis’s, in particular¹⁰) that murderous Stalinism was a

key determinant of Soviet foreign policy, and thus of the Cold War. These are the intellectual foundations for a political defense of Truman’s positions, and Offner is right to concede some ground to them. But such balance suffers at the hands of a fashionable postmodernism that includes disavowals of “master narratives,” as Offner terms sweeping Cold War histories. This postmodernism cedes too much of the historian’s ground to a jaundiced relativism that deems Truman’s certitude “parochial” and “uncritical.”

Ironically, however, this very certitude that so irks Offner seems to have been Truman’s greatest source of strength as president and, for commentators and other popular observers, his most memorable personal attribute. David McCullough’s *Truman*¹¹ recounts one Truman staffer’s summation of the president’s style: “Not only could he simplify complex matters, he could also keep simple matters simple.”¹² (As a telling aside, McCullough’s biography, though clearly the most extensive study of Truman ever produced, merits only a single footnote reference in Offner’s 626-page study. It is, perhaps not coincidentally, a very warm assessment of the president from Independence.) Truman aide George Else’s recollection of the Truman years, also from the McCullough volume, runs thus: “There was no vast foreign policy machinery at the White House. There was no vast machinery on any subject at the White House . . . [and no one trying to] prove to the President, that they’re smarter and more brilliant and their ideas are better . . . None of that existed. Had anybody at the White House tried to behave that way, he would have been out of there in thirty seconds flat.”¹³ In spite of this, McCullough quotes staff sources asserting that Truman was “a prodigious reader” who “each night . . . would carry home a portfolio, often six or eight

inches thick.”¹⁴ Or that “the staff was continuously amazed by the President’s knowledge of the country,”¹⁵ or that there seems to be some factual basis behind claims that Truman’s self-tutoring as a youth in Missouri was unusual for its depth and breadth.

Truman told his staff in 1947 that he would have preferred the historian’s profession to that of statesman. Asked why, he replied that “[Teaching history] would be not nearly so much trouble.”¹⁶ Perhaps, but as Offner’s book proves, what ample chance there is for the making of it.

Notes

¹ Arnold Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945–1953* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xii.

² *Ibid.*

³ Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁴ Offner, *Another Such Victory*, xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

¹² *Ibid.*, 558.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 559.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 557.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 558.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*