



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Forum: Perspectives on From Roosevelt to Truman [Review of: W.D. Miscamble (2006) From Roosevelt to Truman]

van Dijk, R.; Offner, A.A.

Published in:
Journal of Cold War Studies

DOI:
[10.1162/jcws.2008.10.4.133](https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2008.10.4.133)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Dijk, R., & Offner, A. A. (2008). Forum: Perspectives on From Roosevelt to Truman [Review of: W.D. Miscamble (2006) From Roosevelt to Truman]. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 10(4), 133-137.
<https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2008.10.4.133>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

FORUM: Perspectives on *From Roosevelt to Truman*

*Editor's Note: This forum offers two contrasting perspectives on a new book by Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War*, which reassesses U.S. policy under Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and the origins of the Cold War. Because reactions to the book have been so divergent, we solicited reviews from two experts on the early Cold War, Ruud van Dijk and Arnold A. Offner, whose views of the book differ markedly.*

Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xx + 393 pp., \$39.00 cloth, \$27.99 paper.

Reviewed by Ruud van Dijk, University of Amsterdam

The “new Cold War history,” despite its numerous and significant accomplishments, has not generated a consensus about the conflict’s origins. As several early reviews have already shown, Wilson Miscamble’s *From Roosevelt to Truman* is unlikely to create one either. For one thing, Miscamble’s critique of Cold War “revisionists,” though often compelling, is too direct and blunt for the great majority of his colleagues to welcome this book as a new standard. For another, even though the book is unabashedly Washington-centric, its discussion of the motives and actions of especially the Soviet leader Josif Stalin will strike many as incomplete as well as insufficiently nuanced. Still, as a result of Miscamble’s study of the transition in U.S. foreign policy from Franklin Roosevelt to Harry Truman in 1945 and 1946, certain arguments about the onset of the East-West conflict are going to be more difficult to make than before.

A work based as much on original research as on recent and traditional Cold War scholarship, *From Roosevelt to Truman* is mostly about the way President Truman perceived, tried to continue, but also changed the foreign policy he inherited from Roosevelt, especially toward Stalin’s Soviet Union. Miscamble’s achievements in reengaging one of the oldest issues in Cold War

Journal of Cold War Studies

Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 2008, pp. 133–141

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

history are many, but his main contribution is to offer us a genuinely fresh look at how the situation looked to Truman. Miscamble does so by rigorously trying to read the story “forward,” instead of letting himself be guided by the concerns of a later time.

Sharply critical of Roosevelt, nuanced and ultimately sympathetic toward Truman, and unfailingly admiring of British leaders such as Winston Churchill and Ernest Bevin, Miscamble apparently hopes most of all in this book to correct accounts by “revisionist” historians, especially those in the United States. In particular, he seeks to refute the “reversal” thesis, which holds that as soon as Truman assumed the presidency in April 1945 a fundamental shift took place in U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union.

Miscamble is tough on those who have argued that the new president in his first meetings with Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov in April 1945 took a new hard line, signaling to Moscow that the wartime collaboration between the two countries was coming to an end. Miscamble scorns claims that Japan was about to throw in the towel in the late summer of 1945 and that its surrender could have been achieved through diplomacy. He is equally dismissive of “atomic diplomacy” arguments, especially those arguing that Truman decided to drop nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki primarily to intimidate the Soviet Union. Miscamble argues that contrary to most of the recent scholarship on early U.S. Cold War policy, the Truman administration did not have the contours of a new strategy of containment in place by the summer of 1945. Instead, according to Miscamble, Truman and his advisers did not think strategically about the U.S. role in the postwar world (certainly not in a way fundamentally different from Roosevelt) and did not definitively embrace an anti-Soviet foreign policy until early 1947 following Britain’s warning that it would soon abdicate its traditional role in the eastern Mediterranean. On all these issues, Miscamble presents well-researched, persuasive arguments, and anyone interested in the U.S. role in the onset of the Cold War will have to contend seriously with Miscamble’s book.

Miscamble forcefully and convincingly argues that no reversal took place in U.S. foreign policy during Truman’s first year-and-a-half in office, but he implies with almost equal passion that a reversal *should* have occurred. He believes that Roosevelt’s personal diplomacy toward Stalin was fundamentally flawed and that the president chose to ignore who Stalin was and what he represented. Miscamble depicts Roosevelt as having believed that through his own personal relationship with the tyrant he would be able to modify Soviet behavior. More generally, Roosevelt, according to Miscamble, made naïve assumptions about the willingness and ability of other powers (Britain, China, the Soviet Union) to go along with his vision for the postwar world and was

profoundly misguided in seeking a major Soviet role in postwar Europe at the expense of Britain and other European democracies. Miscamble faults Roosevelt for generally failing to think through the implications of his foreign policy assumptions, for failing to communicate these to others, and for having left his successor little more than a set of foreign policy illusions, an internal debate about their meaning, and an administration without the structure to forge either a coherent national security strategy or practical guidelines for pressing policy questions.

According to Miscamble, Truman shared many of Roosevelt's internationalist notions and until the end of 1946 remained committed to implementing his predecessor's plan for the postwar world as he understood it. This included cooperation with the tyrant in the Kremlin, about whom, Miscamble reminds us, the new president was no more knowledgeable than his predecessor. Truman did not possess an alternative vision of his own, and he was far too busy to develop one even if he had been inclined to do so (which, Miscamble emphasizes, he never was). Truman therefore hoped to continue U.S.-Soviet collaboration on many issues. Miscamble stresses that the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, the pro-Soviet Joseph Davies, maintained considerable sway over Truman well into 1946. But influenced also by the new secretary of state, James Byrnes, Truman did use different methods, most notably a pragmatism vis-à-vis Moscow that Roosevelt had always rejected. Guided by a familiarity with and sensitivity to the prevailing political winds in Congress and determined to get on with the business of conversion to a peacetime economy at home and reconstruction abroad (especially in Western Europe), the new president and Byrnes wanted to do business with Stalin when possible, agree to disagree when cooperation was not feasible, but in general maintain a productive working relationship. The "spheres-of-influence" approach of both men at the Potsdam conference is a good example of this new pragmatism, according to Miscamble.

Miscamble may be the most strident, although unfailingly analytical and fair at the same time, in his chapter on Truman's decision to use nuclear bombs against Japan. He argues that if we look at the issue through Truman's and Byrnes's eyes, there is no other way to view this than as a question of how, not whether, the weapons would be used. Without any prospect of an imminent, unconditional Japanese surrender, and with the paramount goal of saving American lives through a rapid end to the war, the president never really considered any alternatives, nor could he have under the circumstances. Truman had no deliberate secondary objectives either, such as intimidating the Soviet Union. Miscamble acknowledges that this does not mean that the bombings were at all simple. His probing and balanced section on the moral dimensions of this decision may be the strongest of the entire book.

Although Miscamble gives Truman and Byrnes credit for a more businesslike approach to the Soviet Union, he believes that on the whole from mid-1945 until early 1947 they stayed on the fence far too long in what he calls the Soviet-British conflict over the shape of the postwar world, especially in Europe. Miscamble argues that Truman, unlike Churchill and Bevin, who consistently opposed Soviet expansionism, failed to see Stalin's intentions for what they really were, refused to treat London like a true ally, and seemed incapable of decisively moving his policy away from Roosevelt's illusions.

Drawing also on his earlier work on the Truman administration's national security policy, Miscamble argues that the president and his advisers did not think strategically about what had to be (and later became) an entirely new international role for the United States in a world remade by the Second World War. Certainly in 1945–1946 they did not fully grasp how a combination of Britain's diminished status and the Soviet Union's increased power required the United States to step up and assume a leadership role. In subsequent years (a period outside the timeframe of this book), a new strategy emerged in only a piecemeal fashion. With regard to the highest officials, Miscamble's argument seems quite accurate. However, as his own account also demonstrates in sections on the Iranian and Turkish crises of 1946 and Secretary Byrnes's change of emphasis on (western) Germany the same year, the Truman administration throughout its first year-and-a-half also prepared the groundwork for the new, anti-Soviet line that fully emerged in 1947. Roosevelt's ghost, one could say, loomed large until late 1946, but it was receding further and further into the background before being banished from the White House altogether in the fifteen weeks of early 1947.

Miscamble provides an overview of the later period, 1947–1950, in a closing chapter, presumably to illustrate how the Truman administration gradually assembled the pieces of the new strategy of containment after finally abandoning Roosevelt's illusions. Because of the sudden shift to overview mode, this chapter is the least satisfying of an otherwise compelling work.

One other weakness deserves to be mentioned; namely, Miscamble's take-no-prisoners depiction of Stalin's motives and actions. Although this reviewer does not disagree with Miscamble's harsh depiction of the Soviet dictator, the new literature and published sources on the various aspects (and phases) of Stalin's foreign policy are a good deal more extensive than can be found in Miscamble's footnotes, even though Miscamble has primarily relied on scholarship produced after 1990 for his sections on Soviet policy. He has also missed many opportunities to present a fuller, more nuanced, and therefore stronger version of his case here. As a result, his indictment of Stalin as a ruthless expansionist, though not fundamentally incorrect, is too blunt. Addressing this problem fully would of course have required Miscamble to write

a different book from the one he intended to write. Hence, it is less a criticism of his work than an indicator of the kind of work we could still use in conjunction with Miscamble's fine book.

Miscamble's accomplishment is indeed very significant. It takes two sides to have a conflict—and *From Roosevelt to Truman* shows that although there may have been a Soviet-British cold war in 1945–1946, the United States was not yet part of it. The Cold War as we have come to know it had not really begun. That is an important, indeed vital, argument to consider when thinking about the origins of the East-West conflict.



Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xx + 393 pp. \$39.00 cloth, \$27.99 paper.

Reviewed by Arnold A. Offner, Lafayette College

Since the end of the Second World War, scholars of many persuasions and angles of vision have striven to assess responsibility for the origins of the Cold War. Unfortunately, Wilson Miscamble's *From Roosevelt to Truman* provides neither new insight into nor increased understanding of the complex origins of the Soviet-American global conflict. Moreover, Miscamble's derisive attitude toward certain historical figures and the ideas of "revisionist" historians (which seem to include all critics of Truman-era policy) gives the work a disconcerting polemical tone.

Miscamble charges that Franklin D. Roosevelt, greatly influenced by his aide Harry Hopkins—whom Miscamble, using dubious evidence, suggests might have been an "unconscious" Soviet agent (pp. 50 n.68, 145)—naïvely appeased Josif Stalin throughout the Second World War and thus lost Eastern Europe, especially Poland, to Communism. By contrast, Miscamble claims, Harry Truman sought to cooperate with the Soviet Union, but also to uphold past agreements, until Stalin's alleged unlimited expansive policies compelled the United States to adopt a firm containment policy in early 1947. Miscamble concludes that historians have wrongly accused Truman of carrying out a "sharp reversal" (p. 323) of U.S. policy in 1945 and that it is a "travesty" that so many American historians—"who so easily shrug off the danger that Stalin and his system presented" (pp. 331–332)—have subjected Truman to ill-founded criticisms.

From *Roosevelt to Truman* mischaracterizes the policies of both presidents. For example, Miscamble draws an invidious comparison between Roo-

sevelt and Winston Churchill by contending that even if Roosevelt's Faustian bargain to aid the Soviet Union against Germany in 1941 was understandable, the president wrongly looked to postwar cooperation with Moscow, whereas Churchill—who favored aid and struck geopolitical deals with Stalin—better understood Stalin to be a real “devil” and the Soviet system to be “vile” (p. 51). In reality, Roosevelt was not naïve. He properly saw the need to negotiate over the Soviet Union's historical borders and national security claims, but it was Churchill, reeling under British military defeats in early 1942, who was inclined to restore the Soviet Union's 1941 borders. Roosevelt, for his part, warned against a deal that would violate the Atlantic Charter. It was during this dark period that Roosevelt proposed his Four Policemen concept with a view to easing postwar negotiations.

At the same time, Roosevelt purposely tried to keep America's nuclear secrets from Moscow during the war, recognized the elasticity of the Yalta accords, and in 1945 attempted to warn Stalin that a “thinly disguised” Communist government in Poland would turn Americans against postwar Allied unity. Roosevelt rejected Stalin's “vile misrepresentations” over the Bern surrender talks and hoped that advancing American armies might allow him to be “tougher” with the Soviet leader. In general, Roosevelt preferred to minimize problems with Moscow—but to be firm—in order to keep diplomatic options open.

Miscamble's contention that Roosevelt should have adopted a more “hard headed political-military strategy” (p. 323) from late 1944 ignores the fact that the Anglo-American decision to fight first in North Africa and Italy delayed the Normandy invasion until June 1944, and the Battle of the Bulge ended only in January 1945. By then the Red Army occupied most of Eastern Europe, and the president's senior military advisers (Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Chief of Staff General George Marshall, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff) opposed confronting the Soviet Union over Poland, especially with the Pacific war ongoing. Thus, for many reasons Roosevelt rightly urged the Polish government-in-exile in London to negotiate with Stalin over Poland's borders and power-sharing with the Lublin Communists in 1943–1944. Churchill was the one who took the lead at Teheran in 1943 in revising Poland's eastern and western borders and who, when negotiating his percentages deal in Moscow in October 1944, pleaded unsuccessfully with the London Poles to negotiate on governance and boundaries.

Hence Roosevelt, and later Truman, viewed Churchill's calls in the spring of 1945 for military posturing as impractical if only because Soviet armies already controlled Berlin (and Vienna), which they could have refused to open to the West. One should also remember that U.S. war strategy was aimed at minimizing American casualties and left the Americans and British in control

of Western Europe, including occupied Italy, from which they excluded the Soviet Union—and set a precedent for Eastern Europe.

Miscamble's depiction of Truman's prepresidential development does little to demonstrate how the president's thinking evolved into that of a Wilsonian. More important, the thesis that Truman did not suddenly reverse FDR's policies is hardly new. Historians have long recognized that Truman did not intend a diplomatic break when he met Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov in April 1945, that Anglo-American officials (including Hopkins!) had urged the president to be blunt, and that Truman later exaggerated his alleged charge to the Soviet leaders to carry out their agreements, words that do not appear in the minutes of the meeting. Still, Truman drew a brisk response from Stalin the next day about Poland's importance to Soviet security and about Stalin's acceptance of British-backed regimes in Belgium and Greece.

It is also well known that Truman dispatched Hopkins to Moscow in late May 1945 to seek accord with the Soviet Union and ultimately agreed to accept the so-called Yugoslav formula (four or five non-Communists out of eighteen or twenty cabinet seats) for Poland, while Stalin assured him of Soviet entry into the Pacific war. But the Molotov and Hopkins episodes, and the signing of the United Nations (UN) Charter in June 1945, do not justify Miscamble's gross claim that 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" (p. 171).

In fact, the Potsdam Conference soon revealed marked differences between Roosevelt's and Truman's diplomacy and growing Soviet-American discord. Miscamble notes that the American and Soviet leaders arrived at their meeting "quite divided" (p. 184) over German reparations and that Secretary of State James Byrnes hoped that the nuclear bomb might yield some diplomatic dividends. But Miscamble minimizes the significance of the former issue and says that the latter was of little import because neither Truman nor Byrnes would allow "moral complexities or future diplomatic implications" to complicate their "straightforward thinking" (p. 176). In sum, the purpose of using nuclear bombs against Japan was to minimize U.S. casualties and end the war swiftly, notwithstanding the "distorted" (p. 187) ideas of Gar Alperowitz and other revisionists that the United States also sought political gain over Moscow.

Miscamble's narrow emphasis on the use of the nuclear bomb for purely military reasons ignores the pervasive influence of the new weapon on the Potsdam negotiations. Stimson's diary is replete with references to the bomb as a "royal straight flush" that would be "dominant" in a showdown, and Byrnes believed that the bomb would not only make the Soviet Union more "manageable" in Europe but also allow the United States to "outmaneuver"

the USSR in China and prevent the Red Army from getting in on the “kill” of Japan or its occupation. Truman viewed the bomb as his “ace in the hole,” which, as Churchill noted, encouraged the president to tell Stalin and Molotov “where they got on and off.”

Thus Byrnes withdrew as a basis for discussion the Yalta proposal for \$20 billion in German reparations with the Soviet Union to receive half, and on 29 July he pressed an indivisible, three-part ultimatum, to be accepted within a day or the Americans would leave the conference. This deal included zonal reparations, with Western-Eastern zone industrial-agricultural exchanges, but with no fixed reparations sum or Soviet access to the Ruhr and with zonal military commanders given final authority over reparations. The U.S. delegation also pressed a peace treaty for Italy and its admission into the UN and urged that Poland would administer but not be sovereign over its newly acquired German territory.

Miscamble follows Marc Trachtenberg’s view that Byrnes intended zonal reparations to be an amicable spheres-of-influence settlement over Germany. But Soviet leaders gave in because they saw no alternative, and they were angry that they had been seriously disadvantaged on the immensely significant issue of German reparations, which they viewed as critical to recovering from wartime devastation and to assuring, as many Europeans hoped, that Germany would remain weak. Equally significant, zonal reparations augured not just the de facto economic division of Germany but also political division—a big step toward Cold War over divided Germany.

Equally important, Miscamble’s seeming regret that historians have spilled too much ink seeking to explain the use of nuclear weapons against Japan because U.S. officials’ chief concern was to reduce the cost of “American blood and treasure” (p. 178) shows little grasp of this complex issue. Miscamble argues that if Truman had intended to pressure the Soviet Union, he would have told Stalin that the United States had a nuclear bomb when they spoke at Potsdam on 24 July. But Truman deliberately talked only casually about having an unusually powerful weapon because he intended to be gone from Potsdam before using it, and he would not have to respond to the Soviet leader’s inevitable questions. Stalin, however, grasped Truman’s intended deception, took it as a sign that the Americans were raising their bargaining prices, and ordered his military to move up the planned attack on Japan.

Certainly the United States wanted to gain Japan’s fast surrender, and Emperor Hirohito and his military waited too long to capitulate. But this does not gainsay that U.S. officials were also inclined to use the nuclear bomb for political reasons, especially after they realized that they did not want the Red Army in the Pacific war or wanted to limit Soviet advances in Manchuria and on Japan. Byrnes not only struck from the Potsdam Declaration a concil-

iatory offer to retain the emperor but also proposed coercive warnings regarding the bomb and Soviet entry into the war, the latter perhaps the most frightening concern for the Japanese. Truman also refused to allow Stalin to sign the declaration. In short, the Americans saw use of the nuclear bombs as a means of ending the war quickly and of constraining the Soviet Union in Asia, which perhaps explains why they gave almost no thought to *not* using the new bombs. But once the bombs were dropped and the Red Army was in the war, U.S. officials hastened to finesse unconditional surrender by proposing that the emperor would remain subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in Japan.

The final two chapters of the book, largely a survey of Truman's diplomacy to early 1947, contain numerous debatable contentions with respect to Truman's willingness to undertake international control of nuclear power, the meaning of the president's "iron fist" letter to Byrnes in January 1946, U.S. policy in Germany, and Stalin's alleged intentions to dominate, or Communize, all of Germany and Western Europe.

To be sure, many issues related to the origins of the Cold War remain subject to debate and to the fuller opening of archives. But what is most striking about Miscamble's black-and-white approach to the roots of the Cold War and Truman's diplomacy is his belief that differing views should now be dispatched to the "burial grounds for flawed interpretations" and "pensioned off once and for all" (p. 323) from studies of U.S. foreign policy and American history textbooks. This presumptuous view reflects less the spirit of intellectual inquiry or contention than the chilling orthodoxy expressed by certain politicians during the 1950s.