FEATURE REVIEW

Where the Buck Stopped: Harry S Truman and the Cold War


Anyone who bought stock in Harry S Truman’s historical and public reputation shortly before the end of the Cold War has made a killing: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent mood of self-congratulation, combined with disillusionment about modern-day U.S. presidents’ conduct, both official and personal, precipitated a spike in nostalgia for and celebration of the Truman presidency among the public, politicians, and a number of prominent historians—a phenomenon exemplified and influenced by the fortuitous 1992 publication of David McCullough’s best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, Truman. Among historians of U.S. foreign policy, that same year was at least as notable for the appearance of Melvyn P. Leffler’s long-awaited A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War, which, despite the author’s earlier highly critical assessments, concluded that HST’s essential containment strategy and policies in the early Cold War had been, on the whole, “judicious,” “wise,” and, above all, “prudent.” Four years later, John Lewis Gaddis’ influential We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History further boosted Truman’s repute, with its conclusion that new communist sources confirmed that “authoritarianism in general, and Stalin in particular” were to blame for the Cold War, and that Truman’s policy of containment had been both necessary and successful. During the post–September 11 debates over presidential leadership and the possibility of a U.S. war in Afghanistan and then Iraq, commentators frequently cited Truman as a role model. “Is George W. Bush another Harry S. Truman?” asked one analyst on the New York Times op-ed page. “He and we should surely hope so.”

Now arrives Arnold Offner’s *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945–1953*, billed as a trenchant reassessment of Truman’s foreign policy that “sharply challenges the prevailing view” and exposes him as a “parochial nationalist” whose “simplistic analogies, exaggerated beliefs in U.S. supremacy, and limited grasp of world affairs exacerbated conflicts” with the Soviet Union and China, whose “insecurity” and “ignor[ance] of historic national conflicts” yielded faulty decisions that left his “presidency in tatters, McCarthyism rampant, and the United States on Cold War footing.” Even the title, an allusion to King Pyrrhus’ famous lament (“Another such victory and we are undone”), seems designed to puncture any sense of triumphalism about the Cold War’s outcome or, implicitly, the momentous decisions Truman made that led us to wage it. Moreover, Professor Offner, a distinguished and honored diplomatic historian, seems well credentialed to take on an iconic figure.

So, is it time for holders of Truman stock to sell, sell, sell? Should those who wish well for the United States and the world fervently hope that George W. Bush eschews the example of his Cold War predecessor and heeds this cautionary tale?

For the first eleven chapters, carrying the story from the closing stages of World War II through the Berlin Blockade crisis of 1948–1949, what struck this reader was not how poorly Truman emerges from the narrative, but how well. To be sure, Offner offers familiar demurrals and criticisms, especially regarding Truman’s use of the atomic bomb on Japan (particularly Nagasaki) and related atomic diplomacy vis-à-vis Moscow, and hastens to underline what he considers the president’s missteps or misjudgments. When it comes to the most crucial decisions and strategies that define Truman’s positioning of the United States for the emerging Cold War confrontation, however—the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, Berlin Blockade, North Atlantic Treaty, and so on—Offner more or less praises with faint damns, carping over HST’s occasional tactical blunders but hardly presenting any evidence of fundamental error or compelling alternatives. Moreover, in his account of Truman’s handling of the Palestine dispute at the United Nations and the recognition of Israel—an issue on which Washington and Moscow anomalously, if temporarily, agreed—Offner absolves Truman of the oft-lodged charge of playing politics with the issue, accepting his rationale for recognizing the Jewish state, rather than attributing it to election-year pandering.

With almost palpable relief, Offner, after slogging for three hundred pages through Europe and the Middle East, finally reaches Asia, where he can unload his most potent ammunition against Truman’s foreign-policy decisions, particularly regarding China and Korea, in the last three years of his presidency. In the footsteps of other Truman critics, Offner faults Truman for bungling policy toward the Chinese Civil War, pursuing an ill-considered “double policy” of favoritism toward Jiang Jieshi that fell far short of being able to save his doomed regime but went far enough to alienate Mao Zedong’s communist leadership and precluded any chance at an accommodation when the People’s Republic of
China was founded in 1949. (Although, given Chinese evidence that has emerged in the past decade discounting the seriousness of Mao's interest in exploring good relations with Washington upon taking power, Offner takes rather more seriously than would I the “lost chance” thesis that Sino-American ties could have normalized in 1949 had Truman been more willing to break with Jiang and risk domestic political objections, he does realistically acknowledge that the “best lost chance” at forging some modus vivendi had probably been several years earlier, during George C. Marshall's 1946 mediation mission [p. 334].)

Offner does not go quite as far as Bruce Cumings does in condemning Truman's intervention in Korea in 1950 to save the South from a communist takeover by the North as an unwarranted interference in a civil war. Like others, however, he does blast Truman's failure to obtain congressional consent for the war, his immediate deployment of the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait (a policy reversal that constituted a de facto intervention in the Chinese Civil War and helped ensure Beijing's virulent enmity), his approval of the ill-fated offensive north of the thirty-eighth parallel that provoked the Chinese entry, his vacillations in dealing with the imperious and bellicose Douglas W. MacArthur, and other alleged wrong turns that, collectively, transformed the Korean confrontation into a landmark on the road towards two decades of Sino-American hostility, the general militarization of the Cold War, and the subsequent disastrous entanglement in Vietnam.

Offner also evokes the familiar revisionist charge that Truman may have squandered an opportunity to ease the Cold War confrontation in Europe in 1952, when Stalin issued a series of notes seemingly proposing a deal for German unification. The Truman administration concluded at the time—as most historians since have done—that Stalin's principal goal was to undermine the momentum toward West German rearmament within the Western alliance, rather than to conduct an authentic search for a grand East-West deal to terminate the postwar division of the country (and, implicitly, continent). Offner argues quite plausibly, however, that Truman and Acheson (as well as Konrad Adenauer) did not take Stalin's entreaties seriously and, instead, gave lip service to unification in the interest of winning the public-relations battle. More tenuously, he also clings to the fairly slender evidence of the Soviet leader's seriousness, insisting correctly that the issue remains “seriously disputed” (p. 427) but also, and more curiously, that the question of whether the Stalin–German Democratic Republic (GDR) initiatives were “sincere or efforts to capitalize on U.S. difficulties” is “moot” (p. 443)—a puzzling judgment, considering the importance Offner gives the episode.

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5. See especially Chen Jian, *China’s Road to the Korean War* (New York, 1994), and his and other contributions to the “Lost Chance in China” symposium in *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1997).
In his conclusion, Offner comes closest to saddling Truman with responsibility for the Cold War. Limited by historical myopia, he argues, HST “remained a parochial nationalist who lacked the leadership to move the U.S. away from conflict and toward détente,” and instead promoted a Cold War “ideology and politics” that cast the mold for successors (p. 470). Clearly, the latter is true—but the former claim suffers from the lack of a convincing argument as to exactly what Truman could have done, given his own constraints and the imperatives of his counterpart in Moscow, to avoid the Cold War confrontation.

Although *Another Such Victory* generally maintains a judicious tone, Offner occasionally overreaches. For example, he bizarrely repeats—not once, twice, or thrice, but four times (pp. 382, 410, 422, and 470)—the assertion or insinuation that Truman might have been swayed by domestic political considerations in 1952 to use nuclear weapons in Korea, though he presents no evidence to support this claim, which is especially mystifying given that Truman was not even running in 1952 and had no particular affection for the Democratic candidate, and that the author absolves him of the far more plausible charge of playing politics with Israeli recognition four years earlier. Does he really mean to suggest that Truman would succumb to “pressure for atomic strikes” in “a heated election year” for the benefit of Adlai Stevenson’s electoral prospects? (Domestic politics, incidentally, is one aspect of Offner’s analysis that could have been strengthened. His narrow, thematic focus on Truman’s foreign-policy actions, a strength in some respects, is also problematic, for it artificially and arbitrarily divorces the story from the complex, day-by-day reality of blending foreign and domestic priorities.)

A wider net for sources might also have provided more perspective. Offner thoroughly mines the Truman Library and *Foreign Relations of the United States*, and scatters useful tidbits from the British Public Record Office. But he does not exhibit much creativity or ambition in seeking out information and insights from the vast and expanding international archival sources that have become available in recent decades, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Aside from a couple of references to articles in U.S. journals, he fails to incorporate the substantial recent Japanese evidence and debate on the atomic bombings and the end of World War II. In his detailed narrative of Truman’s handling of the Palestine controversy and controversial decision to recognize the Jewish state immediately upon its creation, Offner neglects the extensive and valuable Israeli archival records that have been available—mostly in English—since at least the early 1980s. In his take on the historiographical debate over the 1952 Stalin notes on Germany, he cites a couple of noteworthy but largely outdated dribbles from the enormous German literature on the subject that happen to have made their way into English. And as for the Russian and other communist sources, Offner, like his bête noire Gaddis and most other American diplomatic historians, relies on the minuscule fraction of materials that have been written in English, based on partial and often arbitrary access to the relevant
archives. Although Offner cites excellent works on Stalin and Cold War origins by such authors as Zubok/Pleshakov and Mastny, these are constrained by the uneven quality and extent of the released and opened files and certain to be superseded as more materials emerge. Moreover, he ignores the crucial recent findings of Russian scholar Vladimir Pechatnov utilizing newly available Stalin papers from 1945–1946, published in English by the Cold War International History Project as early as 1999.

So Another Such Victory is hardly the last word, especially insofar as it attempts to render any judgments as to Truman’s culpability for the Cold War, which would require a far more rigorous analysis of Soviet actions—and U.S.-Soviet and other interactions—than is now possible. Moreover, despite highlighting some of Truman’s mostly familiar foibles and failures, especially in Asia, Offner does not make much of a dent in Truman’s handling of the momentous decisions that have garnered him the most acclaim—the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift, and the North Atlantic Treaty, in particular, and the containment policy as a whole, despite its excesses. Still, Offner has leveled an important critique that will need to be reckoned with in the ongoing debate over Truman’s foreign-policy record, and put forward a useful corrective to the gauzy image that captured the public imagination after the communist collapse. In other words, don’t sell your Truman stock—at least, not yet—but it pays to vary accounting firms from time to time.