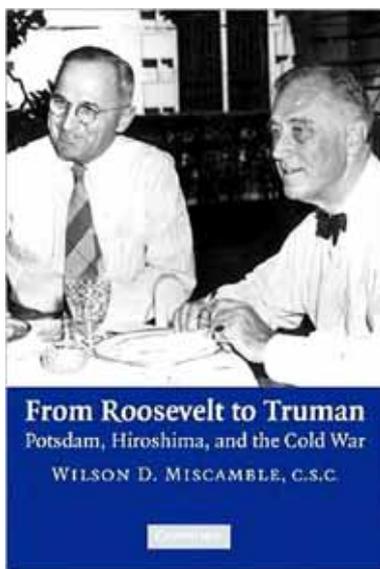


Miscamble: No End to the Debate

REVIEW

John L. Harper



Wilson D. Miscamble

From Roosevelt to Truman:
Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the
Cold War

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2007. xx+393pp

ISBN-13: 978-0521728584

ABOUT THE AUTHOR :

John L. Harper is Professor of American Foreign Policy at the Bologna Center of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. He is writing a history of the Cold War for Oxford University Press.

REFERENCING DETAILS :

John L., Harper (2008), "Miscamble: No End to the Debate", Review, *49th Parallel*, Vol. 22 (Autumn), pp.60–63

Available at : www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Please contact the editors of 49th Parallel regarding any further use of this work. Contact details can be found at www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk, or email us direct at 49thparallel@bham.ac.uk

ISSN 1753-5794

Miscamble: No End to the Debate

Review

John L. Harper

Wilson D. Miscamble. *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima and the Cold War*
Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xx+393pp



Students of the Cold War know Wilson Miscamble (author of *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy*) as a thoughtful and scrupulous historian. Reading his new book they will discover that he is an opinionated and ambitious one as well. He aims to 'drive a stake' finally through the heart (p.171) of the revisionist argument that Harry Truman quickly reversed Franklin Roosevelt's accommodationist policies and precipitated the Cold War. He believes that 'Fanciful notions of 'atomic diplomacy' must be consigned to the historical dustbin' (p.325). He concludes that 'It is undoubtedly a 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.' (pp.331-32). Echoing the early postwar criticisms of Winston Churchill, the 'indomitable' Ernest Bevin, and George Kennan, Miscamble argues that Truman deserves censure not for starting the Cold War, but for *failing* to start it in 1945.

Miscamble's study is provocative and often insightful. But will it end the debate over the origins of the Cold War? Probably not. To begin with, whether Truman reversed or continued FDR's policies depends on what the latter really were. Following William Bullitt, to whom Roosevelt allegedly said Stalin "won't try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace" (p.53), Miscamble sees FDR's approach to the Soviet dictator as an exercise in denial and naive in the extreme. But FDR was more cold-blooded and resigned than this suggests. He saw no alternative to Soviet control of Eastern Europe and expected it to be harsh. He did not believe that Stalin was going to become a democrat. He did believe (and most historians today agree) that Stalin wished to continue the alliance with the United States after the war and preferred the help of the West to its wrath. It is misleading to argue that Roosevelt's mistakes 'should neither be blamed upon domestic or international constraints' (p.51). Two of his most serious mistakes (in the view of this reviewer), the presentation of the Yalta agreements to the US public as the triumph of Wilsonianism, and the insistence to Churchill and Stalin that US forces would leave Europe within two years, rose directly from domestic constraints.

And what was the 'hard-headed political-military strategy' (pp.56, 323) that Roosevelt and his successor could and should have adopted? Miscamble suggests its elements but it remains rather vague. Should the United States have insisted on

Soviet concessions before withdrawing its forces to the agreed-upon zonal boundaries in Germany? What concessions, and what if the Russians had dug in their heels? Should the United States have rejected what he calls 'the Soviet land-grab at German expense [sic!] to compensate the Poles for the Soviet seizure of their territory in the east' (p.216)? Does this mean that the United States should have fought the Soviet Union to preserve the pre-war borders of Poland? Miscamble insists that the historian 'cannot divorce himself or herself totally from the responsibility of moral evaluation' (p.331). Fair enough. Defenders of FDR should admit that he was more cynical about the fate of Eastern Europe than he led the world (although not Stalin) to believe. But the ultimate in cynical (and probably self-defeating) Realpolitik would have been, having profited from the enormous Soviet expenditure of blood and treasure necessary to break the back of the Third Reich, to use political and military measures to prevent the Russians from occupying Eastern Europe and Berlin. A case can be made (*pace* Churchill and Kennan) that not only would it have been futile to try to do so, but that the Soviet people were morally entitled to a period of unquestionable security on their western flank even if this had tragic consequences for the local populations. A similar case was made for the Jewish state that could not have become viable without the seizure of Arab land.

Miscamble gives a detailed and useful account of Truman's efforts (until spring 1947) to fill FDR's shoes. He argues that Truman, and to a lesser extent, Byrnes, allowed themselves to be influenced by pro-Soviet advisers like Harry Hopkins and Joseph Davies. Miscamble is right that there was no abrupt reversal; rather, mixed signals emanated from Washington for many months. Truman backed off after dressing-down Molotov and allowed Hopkins to strike a deal with Stalin on the Polish cabinet in the spirit of FDR. But he also provides evidence that Truman, while wanting to seem Roosevelt's worthy successor and keep liberal support, was viscerally anti-Soviet compared to FDR, and eager to break free of his hold. Miscamble writes: 'As secretary of state [Byrnes's] concerns about the domestic political consequences of international initiatives would influence strongly their nature and content. Truman and Byrnes held this in common' (p.174). This itself represented a change, and largely explains their use of Hopkins and Davies: they wanted to retain ties to the Roosevelt camp even as they adopted a 'quid pro quo' approach to Russia that would 'play in Peoria'. Truman and Byrnes took Davies along to Potsdam but he was largely window-dressing. Once there (by Miscamble's own account), they pursued a tougher line (e.g., on German reparations) and ceased acting as Stalin's 'suitor' (pp.208, 214).

Miscamble makes the important point that Truman's and Byrnes's determination to use the atomic bomb was also related to domestic considerations, namely, fear of the political fall-out should high US casualties be seen to result from the failure to use it. But he seems oblivious to the fact that Byrnes, at least, hoped the bomb would give the United States leverage in dealing with Moscow, and that his talk of going to the London session of the Council of Foreign Ministers 'with the bomb in his pocket' (p.252) undoubtedly made Molotov less rather than more

inclined to make concessions on Eastern European issues. Miscamble does not mention that Truman rejected Henry Stimson's recommendation (in the spirit of FDR's policy) of a private approach to Stalin with a view to sharing atomic secrets.

Miscamble is right that historians should not minimize the Soviet threat but a balanced account of the period requires an appreciation of how the war experience and the reality of superior US power conditioned Soviet behavior. That appreciation is missing here. The Russians are simply the barbarians at the gate. As Kennan himself eventually realized (in early 1948 he began to call for serious negotiations with Moscow), the reality was more complex.





SUBMISSIONS GUIDELINES

The editors would like to invite academics and post-graduates to submit articles on a broad range of topics pertaining to American and Canadian Studies. Some of the disciplines previously covered in 49th Parallel include history, literature, film, popular culture, politics, photography, the visual arts, and their relation within an international comparative framework. The use of film, pictures, sound, and creative web designs will be considered for placement in the e-journal.

Submissions should comply with the following:

Author's name should appear only on a separate cover page, along with title, and a brief abstract (not exceeding 150 words). The author's name should not appear within the article aside from references to relevant other works. House editorial style is based on Chicago (14th ed.) with UK spelling. Please email 49thparallel@bham.ac.uk with submissions, or visit www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk for further information and previous issues.

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

ISSN 1753-5794

