

Frank Costigliola. "After Roosevelt's Death: Dangerous Emotions, Divisive Discourses, and the Abandoned Alliance." *Diplomatic History* 34:4 (January 2010): 1-23. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2009.00830.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2009.00830.x>

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Review by **Deborah Welch Larson**, University of California, Los Angeles

Turning points are useful for collecting and organizing historical data and for writing student examinations. Too much can be made, however, of seeming policy shifts or leadership transitions. In hindsight, there is often a tendency to exaggerate differences between historical eras, to smooth out the bumps of the past.

Frank Costigliola tries to explain the changes in U.S. policy from 1945-1946 that flowed from Harry S. Truman's succession to the presidency in April 1945. He contends that Truman was strongly influenced by the advice of the ambassador to Moscow W. Averell Harriman, who had initially gone to the Soviet Union committed to postwar U.S.-Soviet cooperation, but had subsequently become disillusioned due to his experiences with the isolation of diplomats, the Soviets' refusal to aid the Warsaw Uprising, and Stalin's rejection of U.S. requests for permission to rescue U.S. prisoners of war in Poland. Costigliola's essay falls into the revisionist camp of Cold War historiography in that he attributes the Cold War to the transition from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Truman.¹

In his essay, Costigliola combines discourse analysis with more traditional diplomatic history and uses emotion theory from psychology to explain the reactions of Harriman and other U.S. diplomats to Soviet behavior. He is concerned with emotional dispositions, or "the tendency to respond to certain situations with a distinctive pattern of emotion-suffused rhetoric and actions" based on culture (7). Just as Americans were concerned with being regarded as "tough", so the Soviets were preoccupied with their

¹ Lloyd C. Gardner, *Architects of Illusion: Men and Ideas in American Foreign Policy, 1941-1949* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed., rev and enl. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Delta Book, 1972).

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relative status and standing. Failure by other states to acknowledge these cultural preoccupations may cause the state to overreact. The concept of emotional disposition is relevant to the recent concern with state identities, although that literature is not cited here.²

Costigliola makes good use of the W. Averell Harriman papers to fill in available accounts of the U.S. ambassador's adoption of a more hard-line view of the Soviets from 1944 through Franklin D. Roosevelt's death. He supplements this with material from the Russian archives on perceptions of the U.S. diplomatic community in Moscow.

Soviet leaders had reason to be concerned with others' perceptions, Costigliola argues, because U.S. and British officials sometimes viewed the Soviets as "semi-oriental" or "Asiatic" due to the legacy of Mongol rule, the Kremlin's tyranny, Russia's Asian lands, and Siberian soldiers. This stereotyping was exemplified in the comment made by U.S. embassy employees that Soviet conquest of Nazi-occupied territory amounted to a "barbarian invasion of Europe," a phrase later used by Harriman in his first meeting with Truman on April 20, 1945.

Costigliola brings out the Soviet leaders' deep desire for respect and recognition, which was not always comprehended by U.S. officials. Throughout their history, Russians have been preoccupied with great power status and their international standing due to Russia's relative backwardness, cultural alienation, and a sense of not really belonging to the West.³ Given the achievements of the Red Army in defeating Hitler, Stalin expected that the Soviet Union would be one of the Big Three powers, charged with managing the postwar order. Roosevelt intuitively understood Stalin's desire to be treated as an equal, and was confident enough in America's status position to show deference to the Soviet leader by traveling to Yalta. In their dealings with the United States on military cooperation and postwar issues, the Soviets were acutely sensitive to slights to their dignity, sometimes lashing out and acting belligerently. Not understanding or empathizing with the Soviet leaders' desire to be treated with respect, Americans interpreted the Soviets' lack of cooperativeness as evidence of malevolence or immaturity.

According to Costigliola, the turning point for Harriman was Stalin's callous refusal to provide aid or even to allow U.S.-British airdrops to the street fighters in Warsaw who rose against the Nazi occupiers in August 1944 until near the very end of the struggle. Harriman was further disillusioned by Stalin's rejection of Roosevelt's request for

² See, for example, Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), 171-200

³ Alfred J. Reiber, "How Persistent Are Persistent Factors?" in Robert Legvold, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 205-278.

permission to use the U.S. base at Poltava in the Ukraine to rescue U.S. and British ex-POWs, who were forced to hitchhike and make their own way out of Poland. Americans have historically been committed to rescuing hostages or captives. Despite Harriman's importuning, Roosevelt refused to be drawn into conflict with Stalin over the POW issue or the Soviet leader's accusations that the United States had engaged in negotiations with the Germans for a separate peace.

In Costigliola's opinion, Harriman seized the opportunity posed by the accession of a new, inexperienced President to push his view that Stalin should be reprimanded, advice that Roosevelt had rejected. At his first meeting with Truman, Harriman played to his insecurity by implying that Roosevelt's policy was based on "fear." Harriman also put forward as fact an interpretation of the Yalta agreement on Poland as calling for the creation of an entirely new government rather than one based on the Soviet-supported Lublin Poles, contrary to the opinion of informed observers. He informed Truman that they were faced with a "barbarian invasion" of Europe, which played to prejudices that the Soviets were "Asiatic." Costigliola, however, neglects to point out that in this context Harriman was referring to Soviet policies in Eastern Europe, not the depredations of the Red Army in Germany. Omitted from Costigliola's article is Harriman's subsequent remark that Soviet control over a foreign country implied not just influence over its foreign policy but the institution of secret police and the extinction of personal liberties as well.⁴ Harriman then went to the United Nations Conference in San Francisco, where in talks with journalists he used the sexually charged term "penetration" to refer to the Soviets' imposition of communist control over Eastern Europe.

What must be questioned, however, is Costigliola's conclusion that Truman's change of the tone of policy in April-May 1945 marked the beginning of the Cold War.⁵ History is not linear; leaders sometimes vacillate and waver. Emotions cool and when they do, people may think more rationally. Truman did take a tough line on Poland in his first meeting with Molotov, but his intention was to be "firm but fair," in the belief that relations with the Soviet Union must be put on a "give and take basis."⁶ In other words, he was changing tactics without altering the overall strategic objective of postwar U.S.-Soviet cooperation. It was highly unlikely that Truman, a foreign policy neophyte who had unexpectedly become president in wartime, succeeding one of America's most loved presidents, would knowingly and deliberately make a major foreign policy shift in his first few weeks in office. Harriman was influential in the first few weeks after Roosevelt's death, but Truman increasingly turned to advice from Joseph Davies, a leading proponent of U.S.-Soviet friendship, when a tough approach led to deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations.

⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, 20 April 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, V, 232.

⁵ For a recent account emphasizing Truman's vacillation until 1947, see Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ *Ibid.*

To signal his abandonment of the “tough” approach, several weeks later at Harriman’s suggestion, Truman sent Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt’s closest advisers and an advocate of U.S.-Soviet cooperation, to Moscow to work out a deal on Poland. Harriman later regretted that Truman’s bluntness with Molotov had given Soviet leaders the impression that he had abandoned Roosevelt’s policy of cooperation. Flying back to Washington from the San Francisco Conference, Bohlen and Harriman discussed how to restore U.S.-Soviet amity. Bohlen suggested that Hopkins go to Moscow as an intermediary, to show continuity with Roosevelt. Despite his previous criticism of Soviet policies at the United Nations Conference, Harriman seized upon the idea with great enthusiasm.⁷ In his diary, Truman summarized his instructions to Hopkins:

He said he’d go, said he understood my position and that he’d make it clear to Uncle Joe Stalin that I knew what I wanted—and that I intended to get it—peace for the world for at least 90 years. That Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia et al. made no difference to U.S. interests so far as World Peace is concerned. That Poland ought to have a “free election,” at least as free as Hague, Tom Pendergast, Joe Martin, or Taft would allow in their respective bailiwicks.⁸

Pendergast was the Kansas City political machine boss who had sponsored Truman’s early political career. From this passage, it is clear that Truman acknowledged that the Soviets would have a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and that he was prepared to reach a compromise with Stalin.

Just as observers may treat another state as the “alien other,” so they may also draw analogies to their own political experience to understand a different culture and world view. Truman recalled that he liked Stalin at Potsdam and that Stalin was “as near like Tom Pendergast as any man I know.” Truman continued that he got the impression that “Stalin would stand by his agreements and also that he had a politburo on his hands like the 80th Congress.”⁹ As part of his return to a more Rooseveltian policy of bargaining and compromise, Truman appointed James F. Byrnes, a former master of Senate cloakroom deals, as Secretary of State. On the eve of his first Foreign Ministers’ conference, Byrnes told other members of the U.S. delegation that he knew how to deal with the Russians.

⁷ Deborah Welch Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 176.

⁸ Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL), Independence, MO, Harry S. Truman Papers, President’s Secretary File: “Longhand Memos,” Truman diary, 23 May 1945.

⁹ HSTL, Jonathan Daniels Papers, Interview with Daniels, Notes for the *Man of Independence*, 30 August 1949.

“It’s just like the U.S. Senate,” he said. “You build a post office in their state and they’ll build a post office in our state.”¹⁰

Truman continued to express optimism about the possibility of cooperation with the Soviet Union until he made the Truman Doctrine speech in March 1947. For example, in October 1945, he told reporters at a press conference that “Russia’s interests and ours do not clash and never have. We have always been friends and I hope we always will be.”¹¹ In this transitional period, Truman’s rhetoric did not always portray the Soviets as “dangerous aliens with whom there was an ‘irreconcilable’ ideological conflict” (22). Truman did not change policy conclusively until Soviet pressure on Iran, Turkey, and Greece from 1946-1947 appeared to be part of a pattern of Soviet expansionist probes in the strategically important region of the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Frank Costigliola sensitively portrays how cultural misunderstandings and the desire for prestige and respect led to misunderstandings in U.S.-Soviet relations in the period after Yalta. His analysis of U.S. discourse is often perceptive and on the mark in identifying U.S. cultural blinders. Nevertheless, although Truman’s tough talk did exacerbate Soviet suspicions, it is an overstatement to argue that the “spring of 1945 was a critical juncture in history—like August 1914, November 1989, or September 2001” (23).

Deborah Welch Larson is professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles. She received her B.A. from Texas Christian University (1973) and her Ph.D. from Stanford University (1983). Her research draws on cognitive social psychology to explain foreign policy decision making, as in *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). She is the author most recently of *Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.-Soviet Relations during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) and *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) (with Stanley Renshon). She is currently conducting research with Alexei Shevchenko on how to integrate rising powers into the international system by means of status incentives. This work draws on social identity theory in social psychology. An example of this research appears as “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* (Spring 2010), with Alexei Shevchenko. She is also investigating the use of intuitive judgment by presidents in foreign policy decision making.

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¹⁰ Larson, *Origins of Containment*, 194.

¹¹ *Public Papers of the President, Harry S. Truman: 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), 387.

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