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Forum: Perspectives on From Roosevelt to Truman with commentaries by Ruud van Dijk and Arnold A. Offner. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10:4(Fall 2008): 133-141.

Response by **Wilson D. Miscamble**, University of Notre Dame

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/MiscambleResponse.pdf>

The most recent (Fall 2008) issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies* contained a “mini-forum” on my book *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) [hereafter *FRTT*]. Professors Ruud van Dijk and Arnold A. Offner reviewed the book. Tom Maddux kindly invited me to write a brief response to their reviews for H-DIPLO and I am glad to take up his offer. This is especially so since it gives me the chance to mention that my book is now available in a paperback edition and would make excellent reading with various holidays approaching.

I suppose I should begin by offering the obligatory thanks to Professors van Dijk and Offner for reviewing my book, although readers who have perused the two reviews will appreciate that I am rather more grateful to van Dijk than Offner. Van Dijk expresses reservations of various sorts about *FRTT*, but finds parts of it “compelling” and a work that should influence how historians think of the origins of the Cold War. I particularly value these comments from a serious European scholar of the early Cold War. He well understands my argument (influenced by Fraser Harbutt and others) that the Cold War’s beginnings can’t be told simply as a tale of the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective leaders. I regret that more American historians don’t grasp the point.

Van Dijk suggests that my book “is too direct and blunt for the great majority of his [Miscamble’s] colleagues to welcome this book as a new standard [interpretation]” (p. 133) on the Cold War’s origins. I suppose he is correct on this point: it is very clear that I haven’t managed to convince Arnie Offner on any point whatsoever! And yet, I hope that if my arguments, even if blunt and direct, hold up well--which I believe they do-- they might eventually (and even significantly) influence the broad debate on this important subject.

Van Dijk suggests that a “weakness” of *FRTT* is its “take-no-prisoners depiction of Stalin’s motives and actions.” (p. 136) He would prefer a more nuanced portrayal of the Soviet

dictator. I would be interested to know just what the more “nuanced” picture of Stalin and his behavior looks like. I assume that Van Dijk would not accept the relatively benign portrayal of Stalin painted by Geoff Roberts in his recent *Stalin's Wars* where we can view a cautious Soviet leader eager to continue the Grand Alliance, albeit while being an “ideological expansionist.” Furthermore, I would like to know if van Dijk disagrees with my relying (*FRTT* p. 293) on the conclusion of Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii that “from the very beginning of their occupation of Eastern Europe, the Soviets manipulated East European leaders, bullied and deceived the populations, arrested and shot political opponents. They operated cynically and forcefully to accomplish their aims.” Why should one “nuance” that depiction?

In his book *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Stanford University Press, 2002) Arnold Offner argued that Harry Truman “promoted an ideology and politics of Cold War confrontation.” I reviewed his book critically some years back—see “Revisionism Revised,” *The Review of Politics* (Spring, 2003), pp. 304-06—and, I think it can be said that he has more than returned the favor. So it goes. I had hoped that even historians who, like Offner, are harshly critical of Truman and have indicated a preference for Henry Wallace, might concede that my more “nuanced” portrayal of Truman, which acknowledges his real limitations as a policymaker during 1945 and 1946, added something of value to the debate.

By the closing paragraph of his review, Offner took exception to my comment that interpretations alleging a sharp reversal from FDR to Truman and those arguing that Truman’s accession to power contributed significantly to the onset of the Cold War should be “pensioned off once and for all.” He then proceeded to opine that “this presumptuous view reflects less the spirit of intellectual inquiry or contention than the chilling orthodoxy expressed by certain politicians during the 1950s.” I wonder what politicians he meant? Do Estes Kefauver and Margaret Chase Smith come immediately to mind? On a serious note, and needless to say, I found this comment rather offensive and, ironically, hardly designed to promote genuine intellectual exchange.

I find it rather amusing that Offner complains about my “black-and-white approach to the roots of the Cold War,” (p. 141) when a good deal of my book argues that Truman’s initial foreign policy can’t always be “rendered in the sharp and distinctive colors of black and white—confusion, ambiguity, contradictions, and messiness sometimes prevailed.” (*FRTT*, p. 331.) That said, I want to reiterate my broad conclusion from *FRTT* in hopes that (contra Ruud van Dijk) it will become the ‘standard’ interpretation: “it should be held that after initial attempts at continued cooperation with the Soviet Union, the Truman administration rightly moved—falteringly at first, but then with increasing authority—to meet the aggressive designs of the Soviet Union.” (*FRTT*, p. 331)

Finally, let me record my deeply held belief, which I know is widely and increasingly shared, that “men like Truman, Marshall, and Acheson—men of the political center—and comrades in arms like Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin—men of the democratic left—deserve praise and gratitude from all those who value democratic ideals today.” And let me add that “it is undoubtedly a travesty that Truman and his administration have been

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subjected to ill-founded criticism by many American academic historians who so easily shrug off the danger that Stalin and his system presented.” (*FRTT*, pp. 331-32)

Wilson D. Miscamble, CSC, is at the University of Notre Dame. His book, *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950* received the Harry S. Truman book award. He is working on a book-length survey entitled “The Search for Influence: Catholics and American Foreign Policy.”

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