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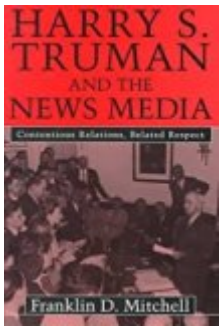
Franklin D. Mitchell. *Harry S. Truman and the News Media: Contentious Relations, Belated Respect.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. xv + 277 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1180-4.



Reviewed by Ralph B. Levering

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When I was in graduate school in the late 1960s, I learned that there are two main types of histories. The first, which might be called traditional history, seeks primarily to fill in gaps in knowledge about past events. The second, which I came to think of as analytic or social science history, seeks to answer more narrowly focused questions about one period of history not only to learn more about that era but also to provide the basis for comparison with other times and places.

At least until the relatively recent fascination with Foucault infected some well-known scholars and respected graduate programs like an unexplained epidemic, most contemporary historical writing, including my own work on domestic influences on U.S. foreign policy, drew on both of these types, frequently blending them together. Trendy, jargon-laden "cultural" history aside, the general direction of historical writing over the past half-century has been away from the traditional and toward the analytic approach.

In his latest book, Franklin D. Mitchell, a history professor at the University of Southern California, places himself firmly--and, given trends in historical writing, somewhat surprisingly--in the "traditional history" camp. His well-organized, engagingly written book, aimed at "both general readers and academic specialists" (p. xi), exemplifies the strengths and the weaknesses of this approach.

The book's greatest strength is the broad and often authoritative coverage of a wide range of topics relating to press-presidential relations during the Truman years. The first three chapters are largely chronological, covering Truman's attitudes toward and relations with the press during the pre-presidential years (chapter One), the period from his accession to power in April 1945 through the election of 1948 (chapter Two), and his second term (chapter Three). These chapters offer a mix of sound insights and often superficial analysis necessitated by the effort to cram numerous events and incidents--and the media and presidential reactions to them--within 25-30 page chapters.

The next seven chapters, which comprise the longest and most successful section of the book, are more topical and in-depth. Informative chap-

ters are devoted to Truman's news conferences; his relations with male reporters and columnists; his interactions with female reporters and columnists; still photography and newsreels; radio and television; press coverage of the president's family, including Truman's well-known furious reaction to criticisms of daughter Margaret's singing; and press coverage of cabinet members and others in the administration. The book concludes with a chapter on Truman's sharply diminished contacts with journalists during his post-presidential years, followed by a brief epilogue.

Like much traditional history, Mitchell's book tells us much about its main subject, about Truman, and about his supporters and opponents in the media. We learn, for example, that the ***St. Louis Post-Dispatch***, widely considered in the first half of this century to be one of America's finest newspapers, "promoted the fiction that [Truman] was ^Ñthe senator from [the] Pendergast [machine in Kansas City]" (p. 13). We learn that Henry Luce's influential Republican-leaning publications, ***Time*** and ***Life***, published negative, misleading photographs and stories that suggested an almost total lack of support for the president during Truman's western speaking tour in June 1948 (pp. 44-45). We learn that Truman was highly sexist, at least by today's standards. For example, he repeatedly used the word "gentlemen" to address journalists attending his press conferences, "despite the visible presence and participation of several female reporters" (p. 112). And in a letter he wrote, in reference to a public statement by Eleanor Roosevelt: "Thank heaven, there are no pants wearing women in my family" (p. 196). And we learn quite a bit about male African-American journalists like Carl Rowan (pp. 127-28) and female ones like Alice Dunnigan (pp. 141-45).

What is frequently missing in this book is traditional history's most common weakness, analysis. Mitchell praises the frequency of Truman's press conferences--normally one per week--but he does not assess them. That is, he fails to address questions like these: How useful were the press conferences to others in the government in Washington and to the American public? How much did journalists and, through them, the public really learn about the federal government's domestic and foreign policies at particular times? How much did they learn about what the president and his top advisers were really thinking as they made their decisions?

Similarly, although Mitchell probably spends more time discussing the conservative, often isolationist ***Chicago Tribune*** than he devotes to any other newspaper or magazine, he fails to assess the Tribune's influence at the time. It is true that the Tribune normally opposed Truman--just as it had opposed Franklin Roosevelt--on both domestic and foreign policy issues. It is also true that this self-proclaimed "World's Greatest Newspaper" had a circulation after World War II of more than one million subscribers in five midwestern states, easily topping in circulation any other standard-sized American newspaper at the time (p. 33).

To state, as Mitchell does, that the Tribune's influence was "indisputable" is to beg the question of just how great its clout at the time actually was. It never was great enough, for example, to keep Democratic presidential candidates from winning in Illinois and in several other neighboring states in the 1930s and 1940s. Nor was it sufficiently large to prevent more liberal papers--e.g, the ***Chicago Daily News***--from competing actively in Chicago and elsewhere in the region. Nor, finally, would most journalists consider it a sign of influence to have a president from a neighboring state--in this case, Truman--refer to their paper as the "worst newspaper in the nation" (p. 33). That assessment, shared by Mitchell, is close to the mark for the era covered in the book.

More broadly, Mitchell does not address the kinds of questions about the press-presidential relationship during these years that most interest many diplomatic historians (myself included) and

political scientists. To what extent, for example, did the news media help to shape the American public's thinking about U.S.-Soviet relations after World War II, and to what extent did it follow shifts in public opinion? When China "fell" to the Communists in 1949, to what extent did the media portray the Nationalists' defeat as a loss for the Truman administration as well? And to what extent did the media contribute to the public's fairly rapid disillusionment with U.S. policy during the Korean War? To take an example from domestic policy, Mitchell notes that "labor lost the public relations battle" (p. 36) in its large-scale, ongoing confrontation with management--and, at times, with the federal government--immediately after the war. To what extent, if any, did the media contribute to that loss?

In short, this book provides a useful yet limited traditional history of the press-presidential relationship during the Truman years. A fine example of a more narrowly focused, analytic study is Louis Liebovich, *The Press and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944-1947* (1988). The sound information and sensible perspective that Mitchell provides in his broader study, together with the large number of primary and secondary sources he has consulted and included in his footnotes and bibliography, should aid scholars in researching the several additional analytic studies that usefully can be written on the media and public policy during these years.

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