

Part II

ENDURING QUESTIONS

Chapter Three

ANXIETIES OF EMPIRE AND THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION

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The election of Dwight Eisenhower as president of the United States in November 1952 marked the end of five Democratic terms (20 years!) in the White House. Scholars who came of age in that period focused their energies on explaining the rise of Democratic Party hegemony in the New Deal and World War II. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. famously called this period the “Age of Roosevelt” (Schlesinger, 1957–60). Roosevelt’s Democratic successor, Harry Truman, received comparatively little attention from historians at the time.

Those who wrote about American foreign policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s focused on the figures around President Truman, especially Secretaries of State James Byrnes, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson. Walter Lippmann (1947), the most prominent journalist in the country, popularized the term “Cold War” in his analysis of the Soviet threat confronting the United States, and what he criticized as the failure of Byrnes, Marshall, Acheson, and others to pursue effective negotiations over areas of conflict with Moscow. Lippmann described American foreign policy after World War II as reactive, defensive, and fearful. He contended that American efforts to contain Soviet advances were wise, but much too dismissive of broader diplomatic opportunities to forge compromises, even with threatening figures like Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Lippmann implied that President Roosevelt would have been more effective, had he lived longer, at limiting Soviet-American hostilities.

I.F. Stone (1952), another prominent but much more radical journalist at the time, defined American foreign policy differently. Stone believed that President Roosevelt’s death had contributed to the Cold War, but he saw a deeper and more consistent phenomenon at work. He pointed to a “hidden history” exemplified, he argued, by postwar American military commitments in Central Europe, Japan, and

especially Korea. Stone argued that the United States acted aggressively to secure resources, markets, and international domination as it had not before. A small class of business and political leaders profited from this set of policies, Stone contended. They undermined democracy at home and freedom abroad.

According to this conceptualization, American foreign policy in the early Cold War was really empire-building. The Soviet Union and its communist allies inspired strong American military responses because they challenged the U.S. empire in its reach, its aspirations, and its greed. President Roosevelt might have shown more diplomatic charm than his successor, but Stone saw the tentacles of the American empire spreading prior to Truman's time in the White House. According to this analysis, the new president contributed – perhaps unwittingly – to an inherited imperial process.

Lippmann represented what many called the “realist” school of analysis, focused on the serious security threats to the United States in the early Cold War, and the defensive moves by Washington to respond to these threats. Lippmann and his followers frequently criticized specific American policies for over- or under-reacting. They saw the United States as a benevolent but sometimes misguided international actor. They believed that American policies were fundamentally opposed to empire-building. Realists often lamented the expansion of American military and economic reach internationally, but they believed these actions were largely necessary to counteract the tyranny and aggression of the Soviet Union. In Hans Morgenthau's (1948) famous formulation, the United States adopted forward policies as a set of lesser evils against worse alternatives. This was the tragedy of foreign policy in a hostile postwar world.

Stone represented a more “revisionist” perspective. He and his followers believed that most of the threats confronting the United States were exaggerated and of American making. The exaggerated threats allowed for deviations from democracy and fairness, according to this analysis. The exaggerated threats allowed for the slippage from a republic into an empire during the twentieth century. For the revisionists, America had lost its way due to the temptations of power and the allures of profit amidst Europe's global decline.

According to this argument, America's new imperial positioning benefited the figures sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) called the “power elite” – the political, military, and business leaders who collaborated to formulate and justify the nation's policies in the name of “national security.” Stone and Mills had precisely the people who surrounded Truman in mind: Dean Acheson at the State Department, Robert Lovett at the Department of Defense, and John J. McCloy crossing continually from Wall Street into various appointed government positions. All of these figures came together to manage empire, and public opinion, in settings like the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, according to Stone and Mills.

Stone, Mills, and many of their followers were patriotic believers in American principles. They were idealists unwilling to accept what they viewed as the elitist policy compromises defended by realists as “necessary” during the Truman presidency. For their intensive criticisms, these figures were often unfairly condemned as traitors to American national interests. Opponents erroneously claimed that they jeopardized American security and aided foreign enemies. Opponents also subjected Stone, Mills, and many others to harassment and other personal attacks. This was the most harmful

and dangerous part of the anti-communist extremism (“McCarthyism”) that dominated American politics in the early and middle 1950s (Schrecker, 1998).

Despite the public attacks and the false labels, Stone, Mills, and their followers contended that American foreign policy and its defenders in the Cold War damaged the real qualities that made the United States great. They accused “realists” of selling out democracy to those with big money and big guns. They accused their critics of buying into myths about the spread of ideals through force and investment. If anything, the attacks on the revisionists in the Truman years only intensified their negative diagnoses of American empire.

The debate between the realists and the revisionists reached an apex just as Truman left the White House and McCarthyite extremism in the United States infected government, universities, labor unions, and Hollywood. During the course of the 1950s and later decades, the intensity of conflict between these two perspectives would ebb and flow, depending on the larger political circumstances. In the later context of the Vietnam War, especially in the late 1960s, scholarly differences between realists and revisionists would again spill into major political controversies, including similar name-calling and efforts at public ostracism. Debates about American foreign policy and empire in the Truman years continued to preoccupy citizens long after the former Missouri senator had left the White House.

Although Walter Lippmann and I.F. Stone were not professional historians, they set the basic terms for debate about American foreign policy in the early Cold War. Both embraced core American ideals about democracy, personal freedom, and self-determination. Both opposed empire. Both also believed that the United States was transformed by the Cold War.

Where they differed was in their assessment of causes and implications. Lippmann emphasized the pressures of foreign threats on policy-makers; Stone pointed to the domestic interests that profited from expansionist policies. Lippmann described uncertainty and reaction in American strategy; Stone saw consistent and premeditated aggression. Most important, Lippmann explored the openness of outcomes and the limits on American control; Stone lamented the narrowness of United States interests and the domineering effects of Washington’s actions on foreign societies. Followers of Lippmann sympathized with what he described as the struggle to preserve American democracy in a hostile and threatening world. Followers of Stone criticized the self-serving American interests that pursued selfish profit at the cost of collective international possibilities.

Historians never reached a consensus between these two paradigmatic views of American foreign policy. Research could never confirm or reject a particular framework. As is always the case, historians assess evidence and interpret actions in light of some basic assumptions about politics and policy. Realist and revisionist assumptions, in modified forms, would guide historical debates from the 1950s to the early twenty-first century.

Some might see this as a weakness of historical scholarship – its interpretive subjectivity. Debates about key principles, however, are the life-blood of serious investigation. These debates kept historians focused on questions of empire, and the various forms of evidence available to understand its place in the development of American society. Interpretive debates about empire in the Truman administration remain, at their foundation, basic arguments about the meaning of America.

The Atomic Bomb

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 drew the earliest and most intense attention from historians of the Truman administration's foreign policy. These bombings unleashed a new weapon that did not necessarily kill more people than conventional armaments in use at the time, but opened the possibility for immediate and lingering destruction on an unprecedented scale. In addition to the massive fireball created by the weapon, the radiation that it unleashed inspired fears of continued damage to targeted populations (Hersey, 1946; Weart, 1988). Some observers saw great possibility for the power of the atom to solve the world's energy needs, but many others feared that this awesome capability would be used to intimidate and kill on an almost unimaginable scale (Boyer, 1985). Bernard Brodie (1946), one of the first and most insightful analysts of the atomic bomb, dubbed it the "absolute weapon."

Herbert Feis, a former State Department official and History Ph.D. from Harvard University, wrote two major books that examined how President Truman, with little background or preparation, made the key decisions on deploying America's "absolute weapon." Focusing initially on the last great power meeting of World War II – the Potsdam Conference (July 17 to August 2, 1945) – Feis offered an hour-by-hour account of how the president learned about the first successful atomic bomb test in Alamogordo, New Mexico (July 16, 1945), how he informed Soviet leader Joseph Stalin of this new weapon, and how he prepared to use the available atomic bombs to coerce a Japanese surrender. The latter was Truman's overwhelming priority at Potsdam – to end the war in the Pacific as soon as possible, with the fewest possible American casualties. Feis concluded that Truman and British prime minister Winston Churchill were bolstered in their self-confidence by the atomic bomb, but they continued to seek cooperation with the Soviet Union, in both Europe and Asia, to manage the postwar peace:

the secret knowledge appears to have caused the Americans and the British to be firm in their resistance to Soviet wishes that they thought excessive or perilous. It was a buttress for the policy of fairness and friendliness to which they were clinging. But the Americans at Potsdam either did not know how to use their command of the new weapon effectively as a threat, or chose not to use it in that way . . . The intention was to find ways to use the technical triumph in New Mexico for the service of the ideal principles that had been endorsed at San Francisco [where fifty countries signed the Charter of the United Nations on June 26, 1945]. (Feis, 1960: 179)

Feis extended his analysis to an examination of events around Japan between May and August 1945. He described what he called the "two faces" of Truman's policy – an effort to crush the Japanese will to fight, including the use of the atomic bombs, and a simultaneous desire to show toleration and goodwill to the people of Japan who were not responsible for the brutal policies of their government:

The designated objectives were two: to insure that Japan could not become a menace to peace and security; and to bring about a peaceable, responsible and democratic government. The Japanese within the four home islands were to be encouraged to develop a desire for individual liberties and a respect for fundamental human rights; and they were

to be induced to adopt a democratic system of government, responsive to popular will. (Feis, 1961: 150)

Feis expressed regret that Truman did not warn the Japanese of the power of the atomic bomb before its use, but he offered a strong realist explanation for American policy. The United States was involved in a long and costly war against Japan that it wanted to end as soon as possible. The United States also wanted to begin the process of re-making Japan as a self-governing, democratic state that would remain independent, but not threaten its neighbors again. Truman recognized at the Potsdam Conference that he needed Soviet help in this endeavor, but he did not want Stalin to hijack the process, as he had in Eastern Europe. The president authorized the use of the atomic bombs, therefore, to end a war and begin a positive process of reconstruction on the earliest possible timetable.

This was not empire-building, according to Feis. Quite the contrary, the author described the limits of Truman's interest in governing postwar Japan, and his sincere desire to find an alternative mechanism that would allow the Japanese to govern themselves with minimal influence from militarists or communists. Truman's hopes for Asia, in Feis's description, were democratic, not imperial. The president was surely naïve about what political change in these terms would require, but his deployment of atomic weapons was meant to limit empire, not create it.

Feis published his seminal works on the atomic bomb and the early Cold War in 1960 and 1961. A few years later, a brash young graduate from the University of Wisconsin wrote a striking, alternative account. In 1965 Gar Alperovitz published his book, *Atomic Diplomacy*, which argued that the Truman administration used the atomic bomb not only to end World War II, but also to intimidate the Soviet Union and dominate the postwar order. Drawing primarily on memoirs from participants, as well as some of the same documentation as Feis, Alperovitz described American decision-makers as aggressive and self-serving in the spring and summer of 1945. Bolstered by their possession of the atomic bomb, Alperovitz claimed, Truman reneged on efforts to build compromise and cooperation with the Soviet Union in Europe and Asia. Instead, Alperovitz explained, an impatient and emboldened president sought to impose a peace on Moscow that greatly expanded American power and severely contained Soviet capabilities. Alperovitz wrote: "there is no question that by the middle of July leading American policy makers were convinced that the atomic bomb would permit the United States to take a 'firm' stand in subsequent negotiations. In fact, American leaders felt able to demand *more* at Potsdam than they had asked at Yalta" (Alperovitz, 1965: 277).

Alperovitz singled out Secretary of State James Byrnes for attention. He argued that Byrnes tutored the insecure new president on the Soviet threat and the alleged need for an uncompromising foreign policy. Alperovitz quoted Truman's recollection, in his memoirs, of Byrnes's advice: "The bomb might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms" (Alperovitz, 1965: 277).

American terms, according to Alperovitz, amounted to the imposition of an empire in Europe. Byrnes sought to force Soviet troops out of Central and Eastern Europe, replacing them with stable governments and capitalist economies tied to the United States. Soviet influence had to be minimized, in Byrnes's view, to prevent competition with open governments and open economies that Washington needed

across the Atlantic to assure American security and prosperity. The rise of fascism had demonstrated to Byrnes and many others how imperiled future American interests could be by an alternative power controlling the European continent. The United States would not occupy all of Europe permanently, according to Byrnes's plan, but it would exert dominant influence across the region.

For Alperovitz the atomic bombings of Japan were not about ending World War II, but instead asserting American predominance after the war. The atomic bombs showed America's unmatched strength. They showed America's technological lead. Most of all, according to Alperovitz, they displayed America's will to act in forceful and overwhelming ways against adversaries. From this perspective, the atomic bombs fueled American efforts to re-make Europe in its own image.

American postwar peace, according to Alperovitz, presumed overwhelming displays of strength. It largely rejected diplomacy, negotiations, and compromise. Americans would flex their economic and military muscles to attract allied support and cower dangerous allies. Building superior atomic capabilities, and then racing to stay ahead of foreign efforts, institutionalized this approach to power. The production, deployment, and management of ever more destructive weapons, in ever larger numbers, became the core for a national security state, as followers of Alperovitz later argued. Nuclear weapons centralized military capabilities and political decision-making in what became an imperial presidency, with powers for war-making and international coercion on a scale unthinkable before World War II (Hogan, 1998; Stuart, 2008).

As described by Alperovitz, Truman's atomic diplomacy created an American Cold War empire that imposed rigid stability and influence in Europe and East Asia. The Soviet Union, Communist China, and others resisted, but they could not counteract American military and economic superiority. Washington's policies, according to Alperovitz, prohibited political compromises and innovations, especially with communist actors. The United States sought to shut the Soviets and their allies out. It threatened to annihilate them if they interfered in the nascent American empire. Alperovitz quotes President Truman, advocating the American threat of force in these terms in October 1945: "It is only by strength that we can impress the fact upon possible future aggressors that we will tolerate no threat to peace" (Alperovitz, 1965: 289).

The meaning of "peace" to Truman and his advisers became the source of long and fruitful debate between the followers of Feis and Alperovitz. Predictably, the realists continued to see hesitation, restraint, and uncertainty in Truman's use of the atomic bomb. Why, the realists asked, did the American atomic monopoly after World War II not produce more strategic gains for Washington? Why was Stalin not forced into retreat? And how did the United States allow the Soviet Union to catch up so quickly, with its own atomic test in 1949? Both critical and sympathetic toward Truman, the realists echoed Feis in pointing to the very limited aims of American power in the early Cold War. The United States sought to defend free societies, the realists argued, not impose domination on anyone.

The United States created an atomic anti-empire, according to Robert Divine (1967) and John Lewis Gaddis (1972). American power was great, but it remained tempered by efforts to limit commitments, vulnerabilities, and long-term costs. American power embraced principles of collective security and free

trade more strongly than after the prior world war. From this view, Americans sought an anti-imperial world order that would serve their interests and their allies at the same time. The Soviet Union constituted a threat because it was the truly aggressive empire.

Alperovitz's followers rejected all of these arguments. Inspired by *Atomic Diplomacy*, they contended that the Truman administration's unilateral use of the new weapons, and the president's emphasis on strength over compromise, gave the Soviet Union few choices but to react aggressively. Stalin had legitimate reasons to fear dominant American power, as wielded by Truman, Byrnes, and others, according to the revisionists. Russia had been invaded twice in the last half-century from its western borders, and its leaders worried that American expansion in Europe, as well as East Asia, would create the foundation for a third attack. Truman's insensitivity to these reasonable Soviet security anxieties, the revisionists claimed, showed a strong inner commitment – sometimes a reckless commitment – to American gain at the cost of others. The decisions about the use of the atomic bomb were symptomatic of a broader rejection of collective security, and an effort to impose American interests on the world. Just as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would force the Japanese to accept near-unconditional surrender, atomic muscle flexing would force the Soviets and others to accept the needs of American security: friendly regimes in Europe and East Asia with open political systems, capitalist economies, and access for American goods and investments.

Martin Sherwin (1975) famously called this “a world destroyed” by overweening American power and excessive unilateralism. Thomas Paterson (1973) analyzed how American power quickly produced many of the attributes of empire: long-term occupation armies, forced integration of economies, and ever-ready intervention capabilities. According to the revisionists, the atomic bomb was the product of an empire in the making, and it contributed to the postwar flowering of that empire. By the 1950s, America's nuclear arsenal protected western Europe and Japan; it also enclosed them in a space dominated, as never before, by the United States.

The debates about the atomic bomb continued beyond the end of the Cold War. They inspired questions about alternatives, missed opportunities, and long-term costs. Every generation of historians viewed Truman's decisions in the spring and summer of 1945 as a turning point – a moment when the final acts of World War II triggered new postwar conflicts. Assessments centered on the question of whether the atomic bombings were a largely unavoidable response to the geopolitical pressures of the time, or an outgrowth of a deeper American drive for expansion and empire. Historical judgments turned less on an evaluation of evidence than on an interpretation of motives.

The Wisconsin School

William Appleman Williams published what became the most controversial and enduring interpretation of American empire, and the role of the atomic bombings in the alleged spread of that empire. Although his major book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, appeared in 1959, it became most influential in the aftermath of the atomic bomb debates between Feis and Alperovitz, and in the context of the Vietnam War. Williams (1959) pointed to a half-century of American expansion before the

atomic bombings, and he explained how those bombings furthered the militarization of American foreign policy in the years that led to the war in Southeast Asia. For citizens who grew disillusioned with American foreign policy in the 1960s, and frequently protested against its most recent interventions, Williams provided a narrative that connected controversial decisions at the start of the twentieth century with the end of World War II and the darkest moments of the Cold War (Suri, 2003).

Williams began his account of American empire with the War of 1898, when the United States acquired possession of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines from the declining Spanish empire. The United States developed extensive permanent military capabilities in each of these territories, and it also extended its long-term political and economic dominance of the areas. Contrasting itself from other empires, according to Williams, Washington placed emphasis on embedding free market economies in the former Spanish colonial regimes. Americans believed that private property, resource extraction, direct investment, and local consumption of manufactured goods would improve the lives of former Spanish subjects, just as they would benefit American businesses. American policy was, by Williams's description, idealistic and imperialistic at the same time.

Echoing the work of a fellow University of Wisconsin graduate, Walter LaFeber (1963), Williams argued that the United States was creating a "new empire" based on the spread of American-style economies. Production, investment, and consumption would be more open than in prior empires, but they would be dominated by the United States as never before. In size, experience, and resources, the new subjects of American expansion would be so small that they would confront an overwhelming competitive disadvantage. They could not form companies, institutions, and local investments capable of counteracting American influence. Local citizens, therefore, would have no choice but to become dependent on American largess, followers of American decisions on key matters about security, wealth, and resource allocations. The United States empire, according to this description, would rule by economy as much as force of arms. It would rule by consent, incentivized and manipulated for Cuba, the Philippines, and other territories in Washington and on Wall Street.

The force of Williams's argument was greatest in his description of the larger American strategic worldview. Beyond the exertion of influence in small territories across the Atlantic and the Pacific, he argued that American policy-makers in the late nineteenth century had a vision for global dominance. Williams emphasized Secretary of State John Hay's Open Door Notes of 1899 and 1900 as evidence. In these messages to the major European powers and Japan, Hay called for the end of closed imperial "spheres of influence" in China, and the creation of "open doors" for all to trade and invest in the vast market on the Asian mainland. The Secretary of State argued for the protection of Chinese territorial integrity, free from imperial land grabs, but he demanded non-prejudicial access for foreign industry.

Harper's Magazine printed a cartoon depicting this vision in November 1899. Uncle Sam stood before a traditional Chinese figure, holding back the foreign imperial powers. The Chinese figure looked at a model train and a suitcase of "U.S. commercial expansionist" items. The Chinese would choose, according to Hay's vision, but they would surely choose American goods and investments. An open competition would benefit the most open and productive foreign society. The *Harper's* cartoon

included a statement at the bottom from Uncle Sam: "I'm out for commerce, not conquest" (<http://www.harpreweek.com/09cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon-Large.asp?Month=November&Date=18>).

The American goal, according to Williams, was to disempower traditional imperial militaries and to prioritize American economic muscle. "A fair field and no favor" would mean the opening of China, the breakup of foreign empires, and the creation of market conditions well suited to long-term American strengths. Thomas McCormick (1967), another University of Wisconsin historian, explained that the American "open door" strategy was designed explicitly to support U.S. dominance of the emerging – and often exaggerated – "China Market."

Fifty years later, Americans continued to think in similar ways about power in Asia and other parts of the world. This was the seminal contribution of the "Wisconsin School" to understanding the Truman administration, American foreign policy, and the global expansion of what they described as an American empire after World War II. The "Wisconsin School" diagnosed and condemned what it defined as a global postwar elaboration of America's pre-existing empire-building. Drawing on the critiques of I.F. Stone and the historical framework of William Appleman Williams, the revisionists of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s emphasized three elements of American Cold War foreign policy.

First, Lloyd Gardner (1964) and Thomas McCormick (1989) – both of whom worked with Williams at the University of Wisconsin – described how American economic policies from the New Deal through the 1950s gave Washington extraordinary leverage over other societies. The United States used loans and investments, agreements on low tariffs and strict property protections, and eventual currency controls to pry open foreign markets. Gardner and McCormick explained that American market access played to the unmatched productive capabilities of the vast U.S. economy. They argued that the Truman administration built upon the "Open Door" tradition that Williams had done so much to articulate.

In a devastated world desperate for capital after war, the United States imposed a set of rules, according to Gardner and McCormick, that gave Americans enduring advantages. Through the Bretton Woods exchange system for monetary management, negotiated in 1944, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), signed in 1947, the dollar became the global reserve currency and the free trade of largely American goods became the norm. For more than a decade after the end of World War II, no country would be in a position to challenge the enormous economic predominance established by Washington. This was more than circumstance, but an act of financial and monetary domination, with strong roots dating back to 1898, according to Wisconsin School scholars.

Second, a number of revisionists added a cultural component to the economic domination diagnosed by Williams, Gardner, and McCormick. Emily Rosenberg (1982) and Frank Costigliola (1984) pioneered this argument for the interwar years and World War II. They described how the American government, American businesses, and American media worked together to spread elements of popular material culture to Europe, Asia, and other parts of the globe. By selling products they were also selling a broader worldview that emphasized individualism, progress, and consumption. Foreigners often did not accept these ideas, but they became more familiar and less alien than ever before. American ideas and images began to crowd out

alternatives, eventually overwhelming foreign consumers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Like the Open Door for trade, during the Truman years American cultural expansion grew in scale and scope. Focusing on the occupations of Western Germany and Japan, in particular, historians have argued that the American military and political figures established institutions, laws, and incentives for the permanent dominance of what was a new lifestyle. Local citizens frequently embraced the promise of freedom and abundance offered by Americans, but they had few other choices. The incursion of ideas and practices from the United States, according to this argument, ruptured traditional modes of behavior. It shifted local lives in directions that gave the United States permanent sources of influences that others – including native cultural producers – could not match. The United States built an empire that overwhelmed traditional cultures, many historians argued (Poiger, 2000; Dower, 1999; Kitamura, 2010).

Third, and perhaps most significant, historians who followed Williams analyzed a fundamental reconstruction of American institutions and society as overseas expansion created new demands and incentives back home. This was what Chalmers Johnson (2000) provocatively called the “blowback” of empire in the Cold War. The creation of a “national security state” – especially following the passage of the National Security Act of 1947 – received the most attention. In place of America’s traditional rapid demilitarization after prior wars, the country now remained on a near-war footing. Among other things, this involved the unprecedented steps of maintaining a large military in peacetime, creating an extensive intelligence apparatus, centralizing military leadership in the Pentagon, and enhancing presidential domination of foreign policy through the newly formed National Security Council. Most of all, historians have pointed to a domestic “culture of national security” that gave precedence to security above most other values, and undermined efforts to limit American expansion overseas (Hogan, 1998; Stuart, 2008). For scholars of the national security state, the domestic changes that accompanied the early Cold War made empire, to borrow a phrase from Williams (1980), a “way of life.”

Analysts of American anti-communism treat the national security state as a crucial foundation for understanding the intolerance, ostracism, and repression frequently experienced by domestic critics of capitalism. The interests and emotions mobilized to support American empire, from this perspective, attacked those who questioned first principles, denying the nation’s right to expand and profit. Historians have attributed the hysteria and witch-hunts of the last Truman years (“McCarthyism,” named for Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy) to the support for empire that came from the White House and other centers of power. Repression of dissent was, according to this argument, a domestic reverberation of America’s foreign aggressiveness in the early Cold War (Schrecker, 1998; Fried, 1990).

Critical accounts of American empire-building during the Truman years, at home and abroad, dominated historical writing for at least a decade after the Vietnam War. Historians differed in their precise interpretations of the Cold War, and their assessments of American policy. Nonetheless, they generally agreed that in the years after 1945 the United States took on unprecedented international and domestic commitments that undermined traditional assumptions about democracy, anti-militarism, and fiscal austerity. In place of divided powers, small peacetime armies, and balanced

budgets, the United States quickly centralized national security, built a vast standing military, and entered into permanent deficit spending during the Truman presidency. These were attributes of an expansive state, with imperial qualities, that diverse historians described, and frequently lamented. Even John Lewis Gaddis, whose masterful *Strategies of Containment* (2005, first published in 1982) pointed to the rationality and logic of American policy, recognized that the relationship between American ideals and actions in the early Cold War was more complicated, and at times more contradictory, than ever before.

“Post-Revisionism”

Scholarship on the Truman administration written in the 1980s was deeply influenced by the Wisconsin School, but historians began to depart from the strongest of Williams’s claims. In part, this reflected a dissatisfaction with the inattention to foreign threats and pressures from the Wisconsin School analysis. The critics of American empire-building saw only one major actor: the United States. They did not give serious credence to the concerns about Soviet and Chinese aggression voiced by policy-makers in the early Cold War years. Nor did they assess the pressures for American action from the nation’s imperiled allies in Europe, East Asia, and other regions. Above all, historians influenced by Stone, Alperovitz, and Williams did not recognize the uncertainty and reactivity exhibited by American leaders in the various crises of Truman years. The Wisconsin School made empire-building seem too consistent and pre-planned.

In addition, the scholars of empire appeared overly negative in their judgments of consequences. Did the Truman administration’s policies really increase repression, conflict, and discontent – as the Wisconsin School claimed? Were people within American-dominated regions really less free than before the expansion of U.S. power?

Doubts about the negative portrayals of American policy in the Truman years were not apologies for Washington’s excesses. They were efforts to restore balance to the historical record. Looking back at the 1940s four decades later, American policies seemed to protect some freedoms as they also trounced some others. The record was, in fact, mixed – with elements of empire and non-empire co-existing across a complicated Cold War landscape. The scholarship on the Truman administration written in the 1980s became particularly interesting because it deeply examined complexities and contingencies that challenged simpler assessments of empire. The United States still might have been an empire, but not one that fit any easy or consistent definition (Messer, 1982).

John Lewis Gaddis (2005) pioneered some of the most important scholarship that articulated what he called a “post-revisionist” agenda on the origins of the Cold War. Gaddis’s seminal book, *Strategies of Containment*, analyzed the wisdom and acuity of American national security doctrine in the Truman years, and later. Focusing on George F. Kennan, in particular, Gaddis showed how American thinking evolved from 1946 through the Korean War. While in Russia as counselor to the U.S. Embassy, Kennan encouraged his superiors in Washington to recognize that Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was neither an ally nor a new Hitler. Kennan described Stalin as a paranoid and opportunistic aggressor, but one who would respond cautiously to superior power. “Containment,” according to this formulation, meant consistent

pressure to deter Soviet forward movements without direct warfare or even extensive American occupations. The United States, in Kennan's vision, would contain the Soviet Union by supporting allied, independent, anti-communist regimes in the places that really counted: Central Europe and East Asia.

American policy-makers often ignored Kennan's advice, but in 1947 Secretary of State George Marshall made him the first chairman of the Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State. From this position, Kennan began to work on implementing a containment strategy that was not central to American policy before then. He had, according to Gaddis, mixed success. The European Recovery Program ("The Marshall Plan") and the reconstruction of Japan marked the clearest measures of containment's success. In each case, American investments in former enemy societies helped to build stable democratic governments that resisted Soviet aggression.

The Czechoslovak communist coup of 1948 and the successful Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 marked containment's most glaring failures. The United States appeared to cede the initiative to its adversaries, and it had few good options in responding to infiltration, sabotage, and revolutionary proselytism. By the late 1940s Kennan's firm but limited efforts to contain Soviet aggression inspired many, including President Truman, to believe that the United States needed more extensive efforts (Miscamble, 1992).

The North Korean invasion of South Korea, on June 25, 1950, reinforced this inclination toward strategic expansion, according to Gaddis. American policy-makers correctly identified Soviet and Chinese Communist support for this naked aggression. It brought back recent memories of fascist aggression in Europe and Asia on the eve of World War II. President Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and other policy-makers resolved to do more than just rebuild select states. They now committed to a forceful and near universal endeavor to reverse communist advances. In the case of Korea this meant not only defending South Korea, but also pushing North Korean armies behind their prewar border when given the chance.

Between 1946 and 1950 American policy evolved from limited communist containment to full-scale combat against communist forces on a North Asian peninsula most policy-makers deemed non-essential just a few years before. Gaddis's book showed how this process was unplanned and largely a reaction to events in Europe and Asia that Americans had trouble understanding. In particular, the evidence of Soviet-sponsored aggression on both continents led policy-makers to believe that the United States needed to show strength immediately – as it had not before World War II – to avoid yet another global catastrophe. The United States found itself in a war in 1950 that it had not expected or desired just months before.

Americans were correct to see real threats, Gaddis argued, but they had trouble identifying the precise nature of those threats: Was it an ideology, a specific state, or a set of local conditions? Was it a unified or fragmented threat? Were there "moderate" communists whom the United States could reform, or at least engage productively?

Without clear and agreed answers to these key questions, Americans could not craft satisfactory long-term responses. Washington's policies were incredibly inconsistent during the last Truman years, according to Gaddis, often sending very confusing signals to allies and adversaries. On the possible use of atomic bombs in war, Truman contradicted himself, first saying he might consider deployment, then rejecting that option. With regard to war aims, Truman first emphasized liberating

South Korea, then advocated destroying the North Korean regime, and then returned to his original stated goals. *Strategies of Containment* showed how American policies were both uncertain and changing during the Truman years.

Gaddis clearly sympathized with the pressures that the president and his advisers confronted. He also agreed with their general assessment of the Soviet threat. Gaddis's criticisms of the Truman administration focused on policy implementation and crisis management. The inconsistency of American policy-makers undermined their goals, he argued. Their reactions in crisis situations, like Korea, made it difficult for them to coordinate their tactical capabilities with their strategic aims. Gaddis's evaluation of the Truman administration was a mix of respect and regret, defense of intentions and criticism of actions under fire.

This mixed assessment brought together elements of Lippmann and Feis with some of the arguments in Stone, Alperovitz, and Williams. It rejected, however, the Wisconsin School presumption that the Truman administration was empire-building. Gaddis did not deny some of the attributes of empire in American policy, but the confusion, contradiction, and inconsistency that he charted ran against any cohesive imperial program. Gaddis described the Truman administration as committed to limited containment, but drawn by foreign events to a more expansive set of actions. Similarly, the president was committed to defending democracy, but forced to fight on the side of anti-communist figures in Korea and other regions who did damage to fair and open government.

Gaddis's balanced view of Truman was attractive because it was context-specific. Policy did not flow from deep purposes, but instead the interplay of unpredictable events. The United States did not create a new empire, according to this analysis. It contained Soviet aggression, supported a variety of anti-communist regimes, and established a web of relationships with independent states around the globe. Washington benefited from superior power in these new relationships, but it was pulled in so many directions, and dependent on so many partners, that the president often found his options constrained by foreign actors. Truman did not command an empire; he managed something closer to a loose federation of anti-communist states (Lundestad, 1990).

This post-revisionist account of the Truman administration did not please all historians, especially those deeply touched by the work of William Appleman Williams and the experiences of the Vietnam War. Gaddis, however, formulated a new narrative that drew seriously on both realist and revisionist perspectives. He incorporated insights from those who emphasized the idealism of the United States, and those who pointed to imperial presumptions. Gaddis also drew on extensive archival holdings from the Truman administration, many of which were only released in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although Gaddis's work did not create a new scholarly consensus, it became a model for subsequent efforts at assessing the period.

National Security

The startling collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War reinforced efforts to author a balanced perspective on the Truman administration, supported by the increasingly open archival record from the period. The last years of the Cold War also corroborated Gaddis's core insight about Truman: he was not building an

empire, but seeking to navigate very complex circumstances. That, of course, is what events between 1989 and 1991 looked like to most observers. As communist regimes disintegrated in Eastern Europe, and then the Soviet Union, Truman's successors were not building an empire. They were working to manage the situation, maintain peace, and encourage democratic change. Post-communist societies became more open to American trade and investment, but they evolved rapidly and with very little direction from Washington (Suri, 2002).

Melvyn Leffler's monumental book, *A Preponderance of Power* (1992), provided a new framework for historical analyses of the Truman administration after the Cold War. Drawing on the most thorough reading of the American archival record, Leffler argued that the president and his advisers acted after World War II to enhance the national security of the United States, at almost all costs. They rejected the traditional American strategic postures: isolationism, unilateralism, and total war. They recognized, as Williams and others had argued, that the markets of Europe and East Asia were too valuable to abandon. They understood the unprecedented scope of American power, but also sought to avoid the costs of a bloated military establishment. They were committed to defend American foreign interests, and they worked to do that short of another third world war. In all of these areas, Leffler argued, American policy-makers had learned important lessons from the recent history of international affairs. Although they did not want an empire, they recognized that they needed something more than just a single strong nation at home.

In great detail, Leffler showed how Truman and his advisers carefully weighed costs and benefits in the making of policy. They feared Soviet advances on core strategic and economic areas, but they did not expect a direct Soviet attack any time soon. Instead, the makers of American policy foresaw a long-term struggle for influence, access, and stability in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Each of these regions had key resources and markets necessary for global prosperity. Each of these regions was susceptible to direct and indirect influences from the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II. The United States had many economic advantages, but it also suffered from its association with the colonial powers, especially Great Britain and France, who often inspired resistance in these regions. The Soviet promise of communist equality and national liberation exerted a strong pull, even where Moscow's resources were meager.

American Cold War strategy, as analyzed by Leffler, emphasized preparing for the worst and taking forward actions to assure safety and prosperity in the face of uncertainty. That is how Truman and his advisers came to define "national security," according to Leffler. It protected core values of democracy, free enterprise, and individualism in what those who lived through the Great Depression and World War II perceived as a hostile international system. It assured gains for the United States as it also promised allies overseas that they too would improve their lives. Most of all, national security was about preventing a re-play of the 1930s, when hostile and extremist powers organized, without significant international opposition, to imperil lives across the globe.

For Leffler, American policy-makers were fearful and defensive; they expanded commitments, pursued new alliances, and contained Soviet power to protect basic interests from worse outcomes. This was not empire-building, but something more akin to classic great power politics. The United States did not seek to govern other

societies; it remained strongly committed to anti-colonial principles, according to Leffler. Americans could not, however, simply let foreign societies fall under the corrupting influences of communist infiltration. As a consequence, the Truman administration set out to expand American influence abroad through military, economic, cultural, and even covert means. National security for the United States in the early Cold War meant the active promotion of liberal-capitalism as a bulwark against communist extremism.

Leffler's widely influential book included clear elements of the strategic uncertainty depicted by Gaddis, as well as the expansive economic "Open Door" vision articulated by Williams. It showed the defensiveness described by Feis, but also the aggressiveness analyzed by Stone and Alperovitz. In many ways, Leffler's work was more balanced than Gaddis's, more attentive to the interplay of consistent American interests and circumstantial pressures for action.

Truman came out of Leffler's book with a very mixed record: prudent in his efforts to assure American security, but unwise when he allowed his fears to justify self-defeating relationships with anti-communist dictators, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. Truman also lent support to the defenders of European empires when he feared that communist insurgents would replace them, especially in Vietnam and Indonesia (Lawrence, 2005; McMahon, 1981). Closer to home, in Latin America, the United States supported the eradication of foreign empires, but sought to substitute a strong paternalistic American imprint (Parker, 2008).

Truman and his advisers wanted to create a world of free nations, but they believed this had to happen in ways that protected the ideas and interests most dear to the United States. This vision embraced neither empire nor full national self-determination. It tried to create a structure for political development that was somewhere in between (Westad, 2005). The Truman administration anticipated contemporary debates about nation-building (Suri, 2011).

Other scholars followed Leffler's lead, pointing to the dominance of national security thinking in the Truman administration. Wilson Miscamble (2007), in particular, drew on Gaddis and Leffler to chart Truman's evolution from Roosevelt's legacy of wartime cooperation with the Soviet Union, to the Cold War confrontation of the 1950s. Miscamble argued that the president and his advisers initially pursued fair compromises with Moscow. When Stalin rejected these overtures, according to Miscamble, Washington did not just react, but worked creatively to build a new structure for peace and security, especially in Western Europe. American aid, alliance formation, and long-term military commitments were crucial to constructing what Miscamble identifies as an umbrella for the growth of peaceful and prosperous post-war societies in what had been cockpits of recurring conflict. For all the costs and controversies, Miscamble concludes, Truman's policies contributed to a dynamic and consensual set of West European and East Asian relationships that endured for more than 40 years. These relationships outlasted the much more rigid and repressive Soviet empire.

Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall (2009) similarly focused on the Truman administration's shift to a more forceful anti-Soviet policy, and the pressures of national security. For Craig and Logevall, however, the key motivation was not the Soviet threat, which remained distant in their narrative of the period. Instead, Craig and Logevall point to the imperatives of domestic politics in the United States.

Truman, they claim, feared appearing weak in the face of revelations about Soviet atomic espionage and rhetoric from Moscow about confrontation with the West. According to this analysis, Truman's public efforts to intimidate, deter, and defeat communist forces – in Europe and in Asia – were designed to assure Americans that the United States was standing tough. Truman, Craig and Logevall argue, was risk-averse and played to American presumptions that the most powerful country in the world can and should impose conditions for peace on recalcitrant adversaries.

Craig and Logevall contended that Truman contributed to a half-century pattern of American leaders exaggerating foreign threats, often for domestic political purposes. The United States, they argued, had a strong bias toward toughness, worst-case thinking, and strategic over-reaction. Leffler and Miscamble do not disagree entirely. Both observe, as Lippmann did before, that the Soviet Union was indeed a dangerous aggressor after World War II. Leffler emphasizes the prudence of planning for the worst in this context. Miscamble reminds readers that the actions taken by the Truman administration produced enormously positive results in the face of a destructive enemy.

The debate between these historians, and others, is not easily resolved. Writing in the aftermath of the Cold War, they agree on three things. First, the Truman administration marked a turning point in the foreign expansion of American power. Second, the key decisions of the president and his close advisers were not pre-planned. They reacted to difficult and uncertain circumstances. Third, and perhaps most important, the policies of the Truman administration emphasized national security, not empire-building. The United States showed little interest in governing other societies for the long term.

The focus of policy for Leffler, Miscamble, Craig, and Logevall was on securing the United States and helping its friends to help themselves. American policies were often self-serving and hypocritical, these authors show, but that seems a far cry from empire. Truman was not an empire-builder. His Soviet counterparts were much more in that mold, and their regime suffered the consequences (Zubok, 2007; Naimark, 2010).

New Research

Historians might have ignored Harry Truman in the immediate aftermath of World War II, but Franklin Roosevelt's successor has received as much attention in recent decades as the war hero he replaced. (Truman has probably received more attention than the war hero, Dwight Eisenhower, who came after him.) The Truman administration built the foundation for American Cold War foreign policy. It also set the stage for a new American presence in the world. The United States was no longer just one big nation among many. In some ways it took on the characteristics of an empire, but in other ways it did not. This mixed verdict is the most compelling and important insight from more than five decades of scholarship. It is also a verdict that rings true for American policy in the twenty-first century.

Future research on the Truman administration will continue to examine the question of empire, especially as this issue remains prominent in debates about twenty-first-century foreign policy. The legacies of American Cold War expansion, particularly in the Middle East, will surely get more attention. Above all, questions about

the role of democracy – at home and abroad – in the spread of American power will attract more analysis. How did the policies of the Truman administration redefine the relationship between democracy and power? How did American democracy change in practice?

These issues will continue to inspire interpretive debates that echo Lippmann and Stone, as well as Feis, Alperovitz, Williams, Gaddis, Leffler, and many others. Historical knowledge, like policy-making, is evolutionary. It adapts to new evidence and contemporary concerns, as it builds on accumulated wisdom and understanding. Arguments about Truman's foreign policy are also arguments about the present. Scholarship on the topic remains dynamic and relevant as a consequence.

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