

Review of Man of the People: A Life of Harry S Truman by Alonzo L Hamby

Noam Chomsky

March 8, 1996

Harry Truman is a marvellous subject for a serious biography and after decades of 'scholarly engagement' with the subject, Alonzo Hamby is well qualified to write one. As he says, Truman was a 'man of the people,' whose life 'exemplifies' many aspects of 'the American experience'. In April 1945, 'knowing little more about diplomatic arrangements and military progress than what one would read in a good newspaper, he suddenly found himself responsible for overseeing the end of the war and the establishment of a new global order'. 'You, more than any other man, have saved western civilisation,' Churchill informed him. It was a 'near-visionary achievement,' in Hamby's judgment.

In 1945, the US had awesome wealth and power. The leadership used it to design an authentic New World Order, with sophisticated planning and enormous consequences. Truman also faced the first wave of a postwar assault by a business world determined to dismantle the New Deal social contract. The challenges were daunting and the achievements momentous.

In 1934, Truman's diary records, he anticipated 'retirement on a virtual pension in some minor county office'. A few weeks later, he was selected for the Senate by Missouri's Pendergast machine. He went to Washington after a campaign that was 'a dreary affair', marred by corruption and chicanery. Until jailed in 1939, boss Tom Pendergast remained 'the dominating presence in Truman's political life'. Through this period, he lined up with the 'gangsterism and corruption' of the Missouri political machine. Truman was never to break from the 'machine ethic', says Hamby.

By 1944, Truman's image had shifted with political tides to 'urban liberal', and he was a reasonable choice as Roosevelt's running mate, a compromise candidate who 'drew little positive passion'. As of early April 1945, his working relationship with FDR remained one of 'distant superficiality'. A week later, he was facing the 'unthinkable challenge' of domestic and global management, occupying what Truman himself later described as 'the most powerful and the greatest office in the history of the world'. Hamby offers the most thorough analysis yet of Truman's pre-presidential life (Book I) and a 'concise account' of the presidency that relates it to the larger themes of the cold war and domestic politics (Book II). It is Book I — the 'crackling good story' that Hamby hoped to tell — that is the more substantial contribution, not only as a picture of the man but of an era of American history. Book II is more questionable.

There is a rich documentary record from the early post-war era, and an impressive scholarly literature devoted to it. Not surprisingly, much remains obscure and controversial. There is every reason for caution in assessing the decisions of those who were ‘present at the creation’, in Acheson’s phrase, and the factors that entered into them. Hamby scarcely tries. Historians who interpret complex and ambiguous material in ways he does not like are dismissed as ‘scholarly ideologues’ or as having ‘a relatively benign attitude toward Stalinism’ – mere slander.

Truman’s first major act was to use nuclear weapons. Hamby’s generally admiring account skims the surface, ridiculing the ‘article of faith among scholars of the left’ that the purpose was ‘to intimidate the Russians’ and keep them out of Manchuria. That ‘article of faith’ has indeed been proposed, and sometimes debated, though largely ignored or rejected by most of those he seems to have in mind.

Hamby also ridicules the ‘left-wing fantasy that the (Korean) war was actually provoked by South Korea’, citing a 1972 study that addresses questions that he avoids, namely the terror and atrocities of the US-backed government in the south. He does not cite the rich scholarship on this unmentionable topic, which gains more significance when we recognise that restoration of traditional structures, including fascist collaborators and (sometimes violent) suppression of the anti-fascist resistance and labour, forms a larger pattern throughout the global system under Truman’s influence and control, often with only a derivative connection to the cold war. These topics too, though well documented, are ignored here.

We read about Truman’s ‘bold new program for the underdeveloped world’, but nothing about the programmes designed to accommodate ‘the colonial economic interests’ of our Western European allies (CIA 1948), or the plans to reopen Japan’s ‘Empire toward the South’ and hand Africa to Europe to ‘exploit’ for its reconstruction (George Kennan, 1948–49), among many other programmes that set the US on a collision course with Third World nationalism.

In place of evidence and analysis, we find appeal to American idealism and innocence, and devotion to ‘morally desirable universalistic idealism’ – ‘impractical’ because of the bad guys all around who prevent us from acting in accord with our unique virtue. And the rest of the familiar refrain, presented as obvious truth, requiring no argument.

Hamby’s account of the domestic scene pursues the same course. Thus union leaders whom Truman despised are ‘irresponsible labour chiefs’ whose labour movement led the way in ‘jamming the gears of American capitalism’. Perhaps, but more is required than insistence that Truman is right, period. Hamby notes popular anti-labour attitudes, but not the huge corporate propaganda offensive to vilify labour and roll back New Deal measures that was launched instantly, put on hold during the war, then resumed on a remarkable scale.

He writes that price controls were overturned after the war under the influence of ‘rural, small-town America’; and also under the influence of a corporate propaganda campaign that infuriated Truman, shifting popular attitudes within a few months from overwhelming support for controls to opposition – one of the most sweeping reversals of public opinion on record, polling agencies reported. But crucial aspects of these features of American society are missing. In fact, the corporate world, hardly without influence in US society, makes scant appearance.

No study can fail to be selective and to reflect personal attitudes and values. But Book II is more a brief for the defence than the historical inquiry that its subject merits. Whether the issue is Yalta, German reunification, Poland and inland waterways, Japan, subversion in Italy, or the rest of the ‘larger themes’, Hamby offers a patriotic version based on confident assertion.

To mention just one case, Washington's stand was obviously right when it sought only 'an independent, pro-Western Greek government'. A Soviet call for 'an independent, pro-Russian Polish government' would elicit only ridicule, quite properly, though Russian security concerns in eastern Europe were perhaps not more outlandish than those of the US and Britain in Greece (not to speak of Latin America, South-east Asia, and elsewhere).

Also omitted is the Churchill-Stalin agreement parcelling out the region, and what actually happened in Greece. The example is typical. Readers familiar with the history might conclude from this account that Truman was out of the loop; worth stressing, were it true.

Book II covers the most important part of the Truman story, but while perhaps defensible, Hamby's account is not subject to serious critical evaluation. He provides a picture of personalities and domestic political maneuverings, but little beyond. Truman deserves better, however one judges his achievements.

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Retrieved on 19th June 2021 from chomsky.info
Published in *The Guardian*.

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