

## review essay

myth in progress

### harry truman and *meeting at potsdam*

The process of adaption—in the old idiom from page to stage—is the object of much current scholarship. With the rise of “new journalism” and “popular history,” new problems have occurred. That the most popular contemporary medium is television, with its well-documented limitations, complicates the problem further: whether by accident or design, popular conceptions of historical events will be shaped by such dramatizations. Although producers have usually been responsible if not always accurate, the reputation of at least one American president has been affected by a series of unconnected television productions. From *Plain Speaking* and *Give 'em Hell, Harry* through *Collision Course* and *Man of Independence* to *Meeting at Potsdam*, coupled with a harvest of books and other material, the popular appraisal of Harry S. Truman is being significantly reshaped.

Why Truman? If one reflects upon the presidents and other political figures of twentieth century America, it is clear that the dramatic potential of most is either slight or quickly exhausted. Wilson's idealism has been amply documented; Roosevelt may have been our strongest president but the theatricality of his tenure seems restricted to the soap opera of his love life. Kennedy's image is massive, but *The Missiles of October* just about covers his significant moment (it would mark a new direction if someone would dramatize the Bay of Pigs!). Johnson and Nixon? Popular history craves winners, not losers. Teddy Roosevelt offers great potential, but his causes are those of an earlier generation. But Truman—not only does he belong to our time, but his was a key hand in shaping the world we live in. Add to that the Horatio Alger aspects of his career as a semi-educated Missouri haberdasher (a point the image-makers capitalize on) unexpectedly thrust into the presidency of the United States, and you have the stuff of legends. Indeed, the parallels between Truman and

Abraham Lincoln, the most dramatized and mythicized figure in American history, are significant: honest, unpolished midwesterners, cutting through the artifice of political idiom with epigrammatic country wit, thrust by circumstance into moments of great crisis—a nation divided, a world divided—vilified in their own time, but in retrospect dominant figures on the stage of history. In the disillusioned 1970s, scarred by Watergate, mistrustful of politicians, perhaps the nation craves a simple, direct “Give ‘em Hell, Harry” leader. Forgotten is his immense unpopularity; remembered are his acceptance of the buck, his outspoken candor, his unsophisticated honesty.

*Meeting at Potsdam*<sup>1</sup> deals with what has traditionally been considered the least significant of the wartime summit conferences—Churchill, Stalin and Truman meeting in Germany purportedly to settle some European questions in advance of a global peace conference.

The image-makers have seized upon Truman with great enthusiasm; the danger in this is not that Truman was not the things they say he was, but that we are ending up with another larger-than-life caricature instead of flesh and blood. Adding to the problems of adaption is that the film is based upon a controversial reinterpretation of history of the same title by a writer of popular history named Charles Mee.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this review, however, is the television adaption, its relationship to historical fact and its contribution to the Truman legend.

The format of this motion picture, commonly found in dramatizations of popular history, is composed of documentary, drama and a potpourri of cinematic techniques. The drama is more successful than the documentary, in this case. In an apparent attempt at realism, an objective-sounding narrator comments on newsreel footage presented on a small screen behind him. Another commentator with a Russian accent and a pert young Wren discuss the preparations for the conference, and a thumbnail sketch of Potsdam, “the Hollywood of Germany,” and the Cecilienhof Palace introduces the drama itself. If these harmless but gratuitous touches are intended to create an atmosphere of verisimilitude, they succeed only superficially—Russians speaking English with Russian accents, official-sounding commentators and a disclaimer at the beginning admitting that “not all historians agree with this interpretation.” The narrator, of course, pops back in to make summary—and highly debatable—remarks about the action.

Certainly the strong point of the production is the casting, and much effort is expended to develop the characters of the three main participants. Jose Ferrer’s Stalin is the most traditional portrait, resplendent in white uniform and bushy moustache. He is his shrewd, elusive self: at times straightforward and charming—“I like him,” says Truman—at other times shrouded in mystery—“I think he’s an SOB,” says Truman. Churchill, on the other hand, is characterized as a sick, tedious old man grasping for the straws of an empire. John Houseman is a masterful actor who makes the viewer forget that no one could look like the real Churchill, but the film follows Mee’s lead in constructing a devious individual—“ceaselessly nit-picked on trivial points,” “downright rude to his assistants,” “loquaciousness,” “boorishness”—who is trying to pit Russia against the United States to rescue a few crumbs for Great Britain.

The most interesting and important character is, of course, Truman (played by Ed Flanders). He is introduced by the narrator as an unknown quantity—“ex-senator, ex-haberdasher,” an inexperienced diplomat but “the best poker player this side of Missouri.” With the latter statement,

the central motif and metaphor of the film is established. Not only do the nightly poker games serve as a device for exposition of the background, motives and characteristics of the representatives at the conference, but also as a microcosm of the global poker game going on at the same time. Again and again, we are reminded of Truman's familiarity with the poker table, if not the negotiating table, and the film suggests, the differences are not so great. The President exhibits those traits so valuable at poker—estimating one's opponents, knowing when to bluff and how to play a pat hand. This metaphor is obviously useful to the film makers, but the device is also dangerous in that it portrays Truman as more confident and assertive than other sources suggest that he was, and it oversimplifies the postwar situation. However analogous poker and international negotiations may be, they are not the same thing. Being a shrewd poker player is an appealing asset but hardly the only talent necessary to decide the future of the world.

There are other characters, but little is made of them. The most interesting of them are Barry Morse's James Byrnes, southern and skillful in negotiations in contrast with the man who took the vice-presidency from him, and Henry Stimson, *ex officio* diplomat of another time, who brings the word that the bomb has worked. Stimson, too, serves in contrast with Truman. He remembers when dinner with the president meant black tie and advances the theory that "the bridge players have given way to the poker players." Byrnes and Stimson are also contrasted with Truman on the matter of the bomb. Stimson is opposed to using it; Byrnes suggests dropping it in the water as a warning.

In other areas, the film is not so dramatically successful. It makes use of only the first and final parts of Mee's book, ignoring the plenary sessions in the middle. The film makers are obviously more concerned with characters and conflicts. Despite these liberties, however, the cinematic techniques are hackneyed and the dramatic structure sputters to a contrived conclusion. Devices such as a quick cut to the test bomb going off in New Mexico or a five second cut of the *Enola Gay* en route are apparently intended to quicken the hearts of the audience in preparation for Truman's world-shaking decision. But, instead, they seem artificial and out of place. Moreover, the bomb is only one of several climactic moments we are prepared for in the early going, but it eventually overshadows everything else at the conference. In fact, two threads of the story which are made much of are never resolved—Stalin's request for part of the German fleet and the effect of Churchill's election loss upon the other conferees. Even the major questions of western Europe, spheres of influence, and so on, are dispensed with in a short scene where Truman and Stalin "divide up the world." Not only does the approach seem simplistic; it is not well-constructed drama.

The Potsdam Conference, unless one accepts the position of Mee, contained little of the momentousness and significance attributed to its predecessor at Yalta. The film's method of picking and choosing from various historical sources fails to convey a complete view of history. Like the book, it does not develop the complex issues and forces playing upon the instrumental members of the conference.<sup>3</sup> What emerges, erroneously, is a picture of the three most powerful men in the world sitting down to a game of diplomatic poker, each trying to bluff the others and gain the upper hand for his nation.

In the prologue to his book, Mee expresses the basic theme which carries over into the film. After listing the numerous interpretations of

what occurred at Potsdam, Mee dismisses them for depending on the assumption that the conference involved men overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. The evidence, he states, will not support the “comforting view of good intentions thwarted by irresistible forces.”

Instead, the conference exhibits three men who were intent upon increasing the power of their countries and of themselves and who perceived that they could enhance their power more certainly in a world of discord than of tranquillity. . . . How they rescued discord from the threatened outbreak of peace is the story of this book.<sup>4</sup>

This specious and dramatically inspired contention is brought out clearly in the film. However, such a thesis-ridden approach ignores the fact that, powerful leaders though they may have been, they were functioning in a world of chaos where the future was in doubt, where the decisions of the past had to be observed and where the war against Japan was unresolved—a situation which no one could manipulate as easily as Mee argues.

The film’s portrayal of Truman is also questionable. On the one hand, he is the unseasoned country boy and accidental president, and on the other, he is a shrewd diplomat with clearly defined motives and goals, the most important of which is to keep the Russians out of the Pacific. Mee argues, and the film implies, that Truman had come to the conference already decided that there was no need for Russian participation in the war with Japan, that there would be no peace conference even though he intentionally refers topics to it during the plenary sessions and that he had already decided to use the new bomb—not just as a military weapon to bring the Japanese to unconditional surrender but also as a political one to keep the Russians in line.

To dramatize the proceedings, the movie skirts the major issues at the conference—the reparations from Germany, the Polish government and territorial demands, the disposition of Bulgaria, Rumania, Finland, and Italy—and uses them as minor instances of the give and take, developing tensions of the conference. These issues are left unresolved, with little recognition given to their ultimate importance in the cold war, and with little or no reference to their final disposition. Only toward the end do we get the brief scene representing Truman and Stalin dividing the map of Europe into two spheres.

Apparently for dramatic reasons, then, the film centers upon two tangential matters rather than those issues which were directly a part of the conference—the atomic bomb and the fate of Japan and the role of the Russians in determining this fate. The initial poker game prepares us for this shift in emphasis. We encounter the shrewd, manipulative Truman for the first time. He says that he has better things to do than attend this conference, but he postulates that the overriding purpose of the meeting is to show himself to Churchill and Stalin—to let them decide whether they should keep their hands in their pockets when he was around or whether he was “some jackass [they] can lead around by the nose.” Truman is portrayed as sure of what he is doing and where he is going. Undoubtedly, the picture exaggerates his astuteness. One of the poker players, General Harry Vaughan (described by Mee as one of the President’s intimates),<sup>5</sup> has expressed in an oral interview at the Truman Library that Truman was unsure of himself and was feeling his way among the new and difficult situations at Potsdam.<sup>6</sup> The picture which emerges from his cronies and his advisors is of a man who sought advice

and absorbed what was necessary, but who was haunted by the legacy of Roosevelt and had not yet found his way in international diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

In the film, however, it is a different Truman who can confidently say “now we know what we are doing here” when he decides to keep Russia out of the Pacific, and who can with Machiavellian clarity define a peace conference as “a bunch of little guys screaming for their rights and trying to tell the big guys what to do.” Although planning a peace conference is on the agenda, Truman confides that there is going to be no peace conference and that the U.S. is only going “to make a show of it.” This interpretation takes liberties with actual American intentions and attributes too much deviousness to Truman.

In reality, the futility of a peace conference did not emerge until almost a year later.<sup>8</sup> Until then, the American position was to have the foreign ministers meet to make the vital decisions—dominated by the major powers. Then a conference of all nations would be called to ratify those decisions. The intent was to avoid the chaos of the Versailles conference that followed World War I.<sup>9</sup> Truman altered his plans because the world situation changed drastically in the next year. This is far different from the movie’s suggestion that Truman’s statements about the peace conference were just another poker move—saying one thing but meaning another.

The portrait of Truman’s shrewd diplomacy and skillful use of power is further developed when the news of the atomic bomb arrives. With this comforting knowledge, he has his “ace in the hole” and knows what he can do with it. From the film’s point of view, everything else at the conference became secondary as Truman seizes upon the bomb’s political advantages.<sup>10</sup> In the tradition of revisionist historians, Truman is portrayed as never doubting for an instant that the bomb will be used. Not only will it bring imperial Japan to its knees but, more importantly, it will keep Russia out of the Pacific. In a revealing scene, Truman mimics the Russians in explaining why the bomb must be dropped on Japan. America must prove to Russia that it means business, that the bomb will not be used simply to kill fish. Truman is shown as a man a step ahead of his advisors who, with the exception of General Marshall, are opposed to using it.

The film even implies that Truman was playing only a power game, that the bomb was not needed to end the war. Like a good poker player, he was exploiting his advantage to the limit. Use the bomb as a bluff to control the Russians in Europe and deny them the Pacific. Exciting and dramatic as this concept may be, the film fails to examine the complex and sometimes terrifying alternatives to this decision. With conventional bombing, a naval blockade, or armed invasion, many thousands of American lives would be lost. Estimates varied as to how long the Japanese could hold out. Everyone knew they would lose, but many lives would be lost along the way.<sup>11</sup> In a point never even suggested in the film, Churchill and others pointed out that the bomb would not only save American lives but those of many Japanese civilians as well.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the effectiveness of the bomb was still in doubt: certainly no one could clearly predict the actual results.<sup>13</sup>

Another idea suggested by both Mee and the film is that the Potsdam Proclamation, which called for Japan’s unconditional surrender—contrary to the advice of many—was not a mistake in judgment but another instance of the clever Truman at work. If the Japanese refused to surrender unconditionally, which he assumed would happen if they could not retain

their emperor, then the bomb could be used and Russia would be shut out of the war. Again, this is a simplified interpretation which ignores that the American people demanded unconditional surrender and would have considered anything else appeasement.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Barton Bernstein, reviewing Mee's book in *Political Science Quarterly*, argues that if Truman had really wanted to do what the movie suggests—keep the Russians out of the Pacific—the logical thing to do would have been to delete the unconditional surrender clause and give Japan a chance to quit before the Russians could mobilize.<sup>15</sup> But he did not do this. Another thing the film ignores is that the military still controlled Japan. Perhaps, had the U.S. compromised, it would have shown weakness and strengthened Tojo's resolve to fight.<sup>16</sup>

Reading the situation realistically, one sees Truman not as a man manipulating events but as a man trying to do what was right. Faced with the need to preserve faith in the allied coalition, Truman struggled with the question of revealing the bomb to the Soviets. If he told them, they could hurry their efforts to enter the war; if he followed Churchill's advice and told them nothing, he would be responsible for a breach of faith on the part of the allied cause. Truman decided to resolve the dilemma by telling Stalin casually after a plenary session on July 24. With typical heavy-handedness, the narrator calls this moment the beginning of the "twentieth century's nuclear arms race." Today it is clear that the Russians already knew about the bomb (although the film shows Stalin and Molotov in an agitated conversation in Russian). And according to Charles Bohlen, Truman's interpreter at the session, Russia was already prepared to enter the war. The bomb only triggered their declaration.<sup>17</sup>

The film's emphasis on drama leads to a superficial and hasty conclusion. After showing a jaunty Truman returning home on the *Augusta* and a sick and defeated Churchill in England, the film implies that the British are finished and that Truman and Stalin have divided the world as easily as drawing a colored line on a map—America conceding eastern Europe but keeping western Europe. The narrator concludes the presentation with the simplistic notion that Stalin, his fears about western duplicity confirmed, went back to Moscow and lowered the "iron curtain."

No turning point in history can be so clearly and easily defined, and the Potsdam Conference was certainly not the climax that the film suggests. Much of what happened there was the culmination of previous events, especially the Yalta Conference. Much of what is suggested in the film about Truman's intentional actions is exaggerated. And only after the problems and crises of the Potsdam Conference were played out in the ensuing months was the "iron curtain" dropped. Only after the foreign ministers' meetings ended in confrontation and the conflicting interests of the U.S. and the Soviet Union became clear did the things attributed to Potsdam become fact. The cold war's origins are too complex to pass off simply as the result of a few powerful men determined to increase the power of their nations. Of course it is easier and more dramatic to show the course of history as changed at climactic moments by men of great will and determination, but, in reality, Potsdam must be understood as a lesser conference with men reacting to the forces of history.

The question, finally, is how much latitude an author or a film maker is to be allowed in adapting historical events for popular appeal. Contrary to the opinions of some professional historians, popular history has justification in that it dramatizes and attempts to explain to the masses the events and decisions that shaped their lives. Television has vastly

enlarged the audience for popular history. But there is a burden of responsibility which the adapter must accept. He may simplify. He may telescope events. He may shift emphases to achieve dramatic climax. But he may not distort the facts, make a completely unjustified interpretation, ignore significant sources, or sacrifice accuracy to advance a particular point of view or aggrandize a political figure.

*Meeting at Potsdam* fails to observe most of the latter requirements. In their desire for drama and mass appeal, the film makers have based their production on a controversial and limited popular interpretation—one which has the superficial dramatic potential they seem to crave. To achieve dramatic conflict they have significantly distorted the characters and motives of historical figures. To build the actions to a dramatic climax they have modified the actual details preceding the decision to use the atomic bomb, and to achieve their ends they have used historical materials which furthered their thesis and ignored those which did not. Truman could have been dramatized as an inexperienced president with human failings who handled a difficult situation well, but the film makers have made him less, ironically by attempting to make him more.

In discussing the demands of television, Edwin Newman observed that “drama demands pace, texture, and action.”<sup>18</sup> In its lust for these things, this particular entry in the Truman-cult sweepstakes, *Meeting at Potsdam*, sacrifices accuracy and depth and leaves misapprehension in the viewers’ minds.

Kent State University  
St. Louis University

Daniel J. Fuller  
T. Michael Ruddy

## footnotes

1. *Meeting at Potsdam*, directed by George Schaefer and produced by David Susskind for *The Hallmark Hall of Fame*.

2. Charles L. Mee, Jr., *Meeting at Potsdam* (New York, 1975).

3. Although this film with its shrewd and calculating main character creates a positive and uplifting interpretation of Truman, many revisionist historians take a similar approach to Truman with less than favorable conclusions. But even those who criticize see the whole issue as much more complex and involved than the simplistic version presented here. See, for example Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York, 1968), 555-563. He refers particularly to the “intricate complexities” facing American leaders, then proceeds to discuss all the considerations and issues complicating the Far Eastern issue at the Potsdam Conference.

4. Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, 12-13.

5. *Ibid.*, 18-20.

6. The Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri, copy of oral interview with General Harry H. Vaughan in Alexandria, Virginia, taken by Charles T. Morrissey (14 and 16 January, 1963), 36, 65.

7. Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History* (New York, 1973), 226, 239; W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946* (New York, 1975), 485; William D. Leahy, *I Was There* (New York, 1950), 348-349; Joseph C. Grew, *Turbulent Era* (Boston, 1952), II, 1447-1450.

8. See for example *Witness to History*, 245-247. He mentions Kremlin “obstruction” at the London Foreign Ministers’ meeting in 1945; Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Year of Decisions* (Garden City, 1955), 516, mentions that the months after the war showed even more clearly than before how “difficult” the Russians could be. Others made similar comments of the growing tensions that had not yet peaked until months after the war’s end.

9. *Year of Decisions*, 344, 348-349; *I Was There*, 388-389; U.S., Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1960), II, 1500-1501. [Hereinafter cited as *Potsdam Papers*.]

10. *Year of Decisions*, 419. At the time, the military uses of the bomb were uppermost in Truman’s mind, although few would doubt that he was aware of the political impact.

11. *Ibid.*, 387; *Special Envoy*, 491-492; *I Was There*, 384-385, 441; James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly* (New York, 1947), 261-262.
12. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston, 1953), 639-640; Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York, 1948), 617.
13. *I Was There*, 441; *Speaking Frankly*, 261; *Potsdam Papers*, I, 889-892.
14. *Potsdam Papers*, II, 1270-1271. The film gives only brief passing mention to this factor.
15. Barton J. Bernstein, review of *Meeting at Potsdam*, *Political Science Quarterly*, XC (Fall, 1975), 554.
16. *On Active Service*, 628-629, 1425-1426; *Speaking Frankly*, 212, points out that the Japanese cabinet did not decide to surrender until the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima.
17. *Witness to History*, 238.
18. Edwin Newman, National Broadcasting Company's documentary, *Violence in America*. [NBC has thus far been unable to provide us with a date.—Ed.]