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David McCullough

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The Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of Harry S. Truman, whose presidency included momentous events from the atomic bombing of Japan to the outbreak of the Cold War and the Korean War, told by America’s beloved and distinguished historian.

The life of Harry S. Truman is one of the greatest of American stories, filled with vivid characters—Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bess Wallace Truman, George Marshall, Joe McCarthy, and Dean Acheson—and dramatic events. In this riveting biography, acclaimed historian David McCullough not only captures the man—a more complex, informed, and determined man than ever before imagined—but also the turbulent times in which he rose, boldly, to meet unprecedented challenges. The last president to serve as a living link between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, Truman’s story spans the raw world of the Missouri frontier, World War I, the powerful Pendergast machine of Kansas City, the legendary Whistle-Stop Campaign of 1948, and the decisions to drop the atomic bomb, confront Stalin at Potsdam, send troops to Korea, and fire General MacArthur. Drawing on newly discovered archival material and extensive interviews with Truman’s own family, friends, and Washington colleagues, McCullough tells the deeply moving story of the seemingly ordinary “man from Missouri” who was perhaps the most courageous president in our history.

Truman Details

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From Reader Review Truman for online ebook

Lynne King says

I see that Steve has recently given a marvellous, in-depth review of this splendid biography on Harry S. Truman's life that I purchased way back on 30 October 1992 (I always date my books for reference) and so I won't even attempt to write a review such as his but then I probably wouldn't have been capable of doing that anyway. This after all is American history.

I had forgotten that I had this book but I had been browsing through another goodreads' author's books (I always do this if they "like" the same book that I do, and I just like to check on what sort of books they are reading), and saw the picture of Truman on the cover of one of them. Due to that I came across Steve's review.

It's a large book of 996 pages, excluding the source notes, index and bibliography, and it took me a while to read but it was absolutely riveting. The only thing that I didn't like, and I never have, is the use of an atomic bomb at Hiroshima and the disastrous consequences. Such a waste of human life but then to put it tritely, that's war I guess. I am an individual who detests any form of violence (I live in dread of another world war) and/or suffering to human beings and animals. I cannot even intentionally kill an ant, and if there is a downpour and all the worms are hurrying across the roads, I will pick them up, and put them quite a way from the edge of the road up so that cars will not run over them.

Part Three, To the Best of my Ability, from page 345 gives all the background to this horrific act. Can one blame Roosevelt for setting this idea in motion, in retaliation for what happened at Okinawa, prior to his death on April 12, 1945? Also why did Truman delay on the date? Did he subconsciously feel guilty? One will never know I guess.

"The battle of Okinawa still raged. In the end more than 12,000 Americans would be killed, 36,000 wounded. Japanese losses were ten times worse – 110,000 Japanese killed – and as later studies show, civilian deaths (innocent people!) on the island may have been as high as 150,000, or a third of the population."

Was this a game of tit for tat? Could a country decide to do that now in 2013? Would they in fact even dare with the consequences? Look at North Korea recently. That's a disturbing fact.

"Big bomb dropped on Hiroshima August 5 at 7:15 pm Washington time. First reports indicate complete success which was even more conspicuous than earlier test." The second sentence sounds so callous.

The dreadful deed had been done. Was the fear that the Russians getting in first the main worry that had brought this about?

Apart from that fact, time permitting, I will reread this brilliantly written book and I highly recommend it.

Marialyce says

This was quite a book, written by quite an author about quite a man. I was totally over the top in my admiration for both Mr Truman as well as David McCullough. What a job he did bringing Harry S. Truman to life for generations to come. To read about Mr Truman made one feel proud and fortunate. Our country was so lucky to have had a man like Mr Truman in control of our government during this, a most unnerving time of our history.

Harry Truman's downhome goodness and ability to see matters in a clear headed fashion certainly made him a President of not only substance but also one that possessed ultimate courage and self denial. Mr. Truman immersed himself fully in the principle of what was good for the common man, not what was good for Mr. Truman. His thoughts were always on his country and of course his family took precedence in his life. He bore leadership as a true leader, not afraid to make decisions that might not always hold him in the public opinion's good graces. He was true to his friends and staff who idolized him and he in return was a friend to the end. He would always stand up for friends and principles no matter what public opinion said. He believed that his job was to be decisive and lead this country to the best of his ability. He was a man of the people and he relished any time he could be with his people. He was modest and never let the position he was in dictate the person he was. Faced with the weight of the world problems, he moved forward in a just and thoughtful way that could not be faulted. He believed in a job well done and surely his job was well done.

David McCullough has spectacularly captured this man in the book. He makes the reader admire, respect, and feel loyalty to this leader. You can tell through the writing that McCullough himself felt a high level of admiration for Mr Truman. I can't say enough about the man that Mr. McCullough made me aware of. I thank him for his writing of this true American patriot, loving father, husband, and ultimately a man of ideals so high that it would be hard for anyone to follow in his path. The buck did definitely stop there and I, for one, am totally thankful that it did.

RJ Corby says

This is a brilliant book about one of our finest

David McCullough's "Truman" has won many accolades and awards, chief among them the Pulitzer Prize. After reading this wonderful book from cover-to-cover in less than a week, I'm convinced that this book deserves all of the praise it has received, and more.

"Truman" is the ultimate, complete package in a presidential biography. Even a novice of 20th century history (this writer included) would have a list of important events that he or she would want to read about in a Truman bio. McCullough covers them all, and in detail: the decision to drop the atomic bomb, FDR's death and the transition to the Truman administration, the Potsdam conference, the creation of the United Nations, the Korean War, the firing of MacArthur, the 1948 election, his decision to not run in 1952, etc. McCullough touches all of the bases beautifully.

The highest compliment I can think to give McCullough for this book is the sense of balance in his writing and how he brings Truman to life. Mostly absent from this book, thankfully, is the rampant cheerleading and bootlicking that plague other presidential biographies. McCullough isn't a Truman admirer who puts a positive spin on every significant event during Truman's presidency. It's obvious that McCullough thinks highly of Truman, but he grapples with the controversies of Truman without softpeddling, unlike Stephen Ambrose's one-volume "Eisenhower: Soldier & President," where Ambrose neglects important events and spends entirely too much time raining down praise on Ike.

This thoroughly researched book presents Truman in a fair and balanced manner, and much of that research is based on Truman's diaries. "Truman" covers the president's bad decisions as well as his good ones, with the president's rationale behind those decisions.

I highly recommend this book and I believe it sits high atop the heap of the many available presidential biographies. McCullough is one of America's finest historians. Buy this book, read it, and in the end, be disappointed that it's over. (Orig. Review Dec. '04)

Manray9 says

Few presidents have made as many pivotal decisions or faced the number of history-changing events as Harry Truman -- the final five months of World War II, the Potsdam conference, the birth of atomic warfare, the post-war nationwide rail strike, the Marshall Plan, the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel, the Czechoslovak *coup d'etat*, the Berlin Airlift, war in Korea and the relief of Douglas MacArthur, the formation of NATO, the reorganization of the U.S. defense establishment and the wartime government seizure of the steel industry due to labor unrest. Truman faced these issues with determination, honesty, directness, and complete faith in his administration and the fundamental common sense of the American people.

McCullough summed up Truman's story on the last page:

He was the kind of president the founding fathers had in mind for the country. He came directly from the people. He *was* America. In his time, in his experience, from small town to farm to World War in far-off France in 1918; from financial failure after the war to the world of big-city machine politics to the revolutionary years of the New Deal in Washington to the surge of American power during still another terrible World War, he had taken part in the great chronicle of American life as might have a character in a novel. There was something almost allegorical about it all: The Man of Independence and His Odyssey.

If Truman's life was an American Odyssey, then McCullough was his Homer. He combined broad research and interviews with an engaging prose style to create a comprehensive, detailed, and easily-readable look at the life of the 33rd President of the United States. At 992 pages of text (the Simon & Schuster 1st edition), it never dragged or seemed padded. McCullough's *Truman* clearly demonstrates his standing, alongside Jean Edward Smith, as one of the two leading biographers of illustrious figures in American history. Harry Truman deserved a biographer of David McCullough's skill and stature. *Truman* is certainly Five Star material in my library.

Judy says

I am 65 years old. I have spent my whole life thinking that politics was stupid and not worth knowing anything about; that even in a democracy, politics and therefore government offered no solution to the troubles of mankind. Now I have to eat at least some of my words and admit that as an American it is

important for me to have a glimmering of how politics works. That is what reading this endless biography about Truman did for me.

I read it, in part, as research for my memoir. Harry S Truman was President the year I was born. I was inspired to read it because of a blog I discovered some months ago: At Times Dull.(<http://attimesdull.blogspot.com>) "In which Janet reads a biography of each American President in chronological order, learning things about America, its presidents, and the fact that the phrase 'at times dull' finds its way into every review of every presidential biography ever written."

Janet has apparently had to turn her attention to making a living (she is a staff writer for The Millions.) She got as far as Abraham Lincoln and has not posted on her blog for several months. But her proposed reading list includes McCullough's biography of Truman. It was at many times dull.

Ever since I was a hippie and took a firm position as anti-war, I figured I had to hate Harry S Truman because it was his decision which unleashed two atomic bombs upon the world. Now my eyes have been pried open as to what factors lay behind that decision. Two realizations followed:

- 1) Truman inherited WWII in much the same way that Obama inherited a decimated economy and the War on Terror. When things get that screwed up, the options shrink in terms of making decisions.
- 2) Truman, at least as presented by McCullough, was one of the more qualified presidents we have had due to a large amount of sheer nerve and having an unshakable moral compass.

So I'm glad I read it, glad I persisted all the way to the end. I know there is always more to learn but it makes me happy when I actually do learn new things.

I still hold most of the views I've held but without a deeper understanding of how the world actually works, those views are just pipe dreams. I would not ever want to work in politics or be the President of the United States, but I am now more interested in being involved in determining the presidents we get. (Yes, I voted!)

AJ Griffin says

For some reason or another, I had to read this book in 3 days. It was like a full time job, considering it's about 3284293842034820384238 pages long. I did it though, and for about two months or so I was a motherfucking Harry Truman expert. Then I forgot almost everything.

Anyway, if you want seem like a history encyclopedia for a little while, take a three-day weekend and rip this bad boy open. Maybe you'll get laid.

(one word of caution: reading this gave me the temerity to say "mcarthur was a giant pussy" in history class, at which point i found out that the substitute that day had served under mcarthur. apparently that's a sensitive subject. be careful)

Diane says

I was shocked that a presidential biography could be so good. Many readers had praised the Truman book, but I thought they were exaggerating. I was happy to be proven wrong.

I think there are several reasons why "Truman" was so compelling. First and most importantly was the man himself. So epic was his odyssey that Truman seemed like a character in a novel. Harry S. Truman was born in a small town in Missouri and he grew up on a farm. He was bookish, played the piano and wore glasses, which prevented him from playing sports. He enlisted in the National Guard and fought during World War I. Then he returned home to run a clothing store, and was asked to run for county judge. Later, he became a U.S. Senator, and then he was picked to be Franklin Roosevelt's vice president in 1944. He became president when FDR died in April 1945.

Epic and astounding, yes? Truman comes across as a decent, hardworking, loyal, honest and down-to-earth guy. It's hard not to root for him -- he was so *genuine*.

Another reason the book was so good was the brilliance of the writing. McCullough is a skilled historian and he wove a beautiful narrative. Truman was a prolific writer of letters, and many details and quotes in the book came from those epistles. I loved the stories of Truman's courtship of his wife, Bess, of his dream to be a concert pianist, of his battle experiences during the Great War, of his senator campaign, of his unlikely path to become vice president, of his whistle stop tour. Marvelous, just marvelous stories.

Finally, there is the knowledge that Truman was such a key figure in American and world history. He had to take command at the close of World War II, he chose to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he decided to send American troops to Korea, and he ushered in a new kind of foreign policy for the United States. Each of those events was incredibly significant and had lasting consequences.

One aspect that I found especially interesting was how Truman handled the atomic bombs. After he became president, he was briefed on the Manhattan Project -- which had started way back in 1939 -- and was told the nuclear weapon would be ready within a few months. I had assumed there would have been some serious debate over whether to use such a bomb, but it sounded like the project was so far advanced that Truman didn't consider turning back. The goal of dropping it was to shock the Japanese into surrendering and quickly ending the war, but it was still jarring and disturbing to hear about the casualties inflicted. (Having read John Hersey's book "Hiroshima," I was picturing the devastation on the ground, and I had to pause in silence for several minutes.)

Speaking of controversial decisions, apparently some historians have criticized McCullough for not being tough enough on Truman. It was clear that the author held the former president in high esteem, but as a reader, McCullough's narrative made it a more enjoyable book. If I wanted to read a harsh polemic on Truman's wartime and foreign policies, I wouldn't have chosen an 1,100-page biography. That's what newspaper columnists are for.

I listened to "Truman" on audio that was narrated by McCullough, and he had a fantastic reading voice. The recording included various sound bites from Truman's speeches, which were wonderful to hear. I highly recommend this book to anyone who loves history.

Larry says

Lifted from my review at Amazon.com

While it's Ok for a historian to like the subject of the biography, he should not love him. David McCullough likes Harry Truman a bit too much. As a result he seldom takes a critical view of Truman's Presidency, politics or personal life. This is disappointing given that Harry Truman was the President at probably the key juncture of twentieth century - the end of War World II and the beginning of the Cold War. More time is spent describing the whistle-stop campaign of 1948 then in explaining the development of the containment strategy of Soviet expansion. He also dismisses Secretary of State Dean Acheson's January 1950 omission of South Korea as being in the United States defense perimeter as being the inspiration of the subsequent attack that June by North Korean forces. While it may not have been the inspiration, that statement along with troop withdraws in 1948 and 1949 were hardly discouragements.

Yes, Harry was the common man who became President but McCullough glosses over the reasons for Henry Wallace being replaced by Truman as V.P. on the 1944 ticket. McCullough tells us that many Southern Democrats and city bosses were uncomfortable with Wallace, especially given Roosevelt's health. But the reader is left wondering why they were uncomfortable. Indeed many Democratic leaders were worried that Wallace and his advisors were too sympathetic to the Soviets and that "moderate" Harry Truman would take a tougher post-war stand against them than would Wallace.

Still, McCullough has a good literary style and his account often reads more like a novel than a biography. This is especially true early in the book when he describes Truman ancestors, background and upbringing in western Missouri. And when he weaves in little anecdotes about Truman's personal life both before and during his time in the White House, McCullough is at his best.

Harry S Truman was a genuine American, a patriot and a good President at a pivotal time in U.S. history. He deserves a more critical examination of his life and Presidency. After all "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Harry could stand the heat and give them hell back. David McCullough ought to know that.

Erin Hepner says

With the elections coming up, I think it is important for everyone to take a good look at what a presidency is all about. This book was particularly interesting to me, because the author is so detail-oriented, you really get a perfect sense of where this man came from, and how he came to be the leader of the free world at that time.

We have to remember that the people in the history books were once just 'real men', with flaws, dreams, and families. Sometimes it's not all policy and hogwash; Sometimes, it's just integrity, experience and good common sense. Look for the candidate who will act with character in an 'unforseeable' circumstance, do not lay votes upon present-day platforms. We never know what the future holds...

Lisa Greer says

Oh, yes, I am ambitious. This book must be 1000 pages. It's huge... and interesting so far. And it won a Pulitzer. I'm reading it because McCullough's bio of John Adams made me bawl like a baby when I got near

the end. I mean-- how can one not cry upon reading about Adams and Jefferson BOTH living until and dying on July 4th, the same July 4th, out of sheer will? I wish more Americans and people in general knew these stories and of these people rather than just knowing a lot of fiction. And I do love fiction, too... but the stories of real lives matter most, I think. They are the ones that can truly inspire and make me feel that I am human-- or not alone in my foibles and weaknesses.

Anyway, I set a goal at the beginning of the year to read six bios per year. This will be my second. :) I feel like I'm learning so much about whole time periods, not just about individual figures. And it's the little details about a person's life and times that are so interesting, I find. Right now, I'm in the beginning where McCullough discusses Truman's roots in Missouri.

As I've read on, I have learned so much about why the south and Missouri and other "border states" as they were called in the Civil War hold the viewpoints they do even to this day. It literally goes back 200+ years.

Steve says

<https://bestpresidentialbios.com/2016...>

"Truman" is David McCullough's 1992 biography of the 33rd president. It was the first comprehensive biography of Truman and earned the 1993 Pulitzer Prize in the Biography category. McCullough is a highly-acclaimed author and historian who is probably best known for his 2001 biography of John Adams. He is currently working on a book about the early settlers of the Northwest Territory tentatively titled "The Pioneers."

True to its reputation, this biography is remarkably lively and engaging for a hefty 992-page tome. McCullough once again demonstrates himself to be an expert storyteller, crafting a fascinating and articulate narrative that generally reads more like fiction than actual history.

A decade in the making, this well-researched biography began to cement Truman's reputation as something more than a simple man of inferior talent who survived politics only by riding coattails and affiliating himself with powerful political bosses. McCullough works assiduously, but not obtusely, to demonstrate Truman's optimism, diligence, perseverance and unshakable moral compass...as well as his intrinsic talent for politics.

There are too many praiseworthy moments in this book to mention, but among the best are the discussion of Truman's military service during WWI, chapters reviewing Truman's time in the U.S. Senate, description of the covert maneuvering which resulted in Truman's selection as FDR's fourth-term VP and the review of Truman's 1948 Whistle Stop tour. McCullough also adroitly compares and contrasts FDR's personality with Truman's (their differences far outweighing their similarities, of course).

Beginning with Truman's ancestry and moving deliberately (though not speedily) to his death, this is more a "popular" biography than a rigorous academic or analytical examination of his politics and personality. And although McCullough is occasionally critical of Truman's actions, this is very likely a biography that Truman would have appreciated and enthusiastically endorsed.

Ironically, my least favorite sections of the book were its beginning and its end. While Truman's humble roots are hardly unimportant to McCullough's thesis, I found the narrative involving his lineage and early

years slow to ramp up. And the eighty or so pages describing his post-presidency seemed relatively uneven and unexciting...but this later period of his life lacks large moments and critical decisions, so it is unsurprising the final chapter suffers by comparison.

Overall, however, David McCullough's "Truman" proves one of the best presidential biographies of the 164 I've read thus far. It is wonderfully animated, thoughtfully revealing, consistently engaging and surprisingly lively. If the hallmark of a great presidential biography is providing a comprehensive (and fascinating) understanding of its subject – and bringing to life the broader history of the era – then David McCullough's biography of Harry Truman could hardly be more successful.

Overall rating: 4½ stars

Chrissie says

ETA: I adored this book when I read it, but now my perspectives are a bit changed..... I am currently reading American Prometheus by Kai Bird. It is essential to get another view on Truman's actions and choices concerning atomic weapons, the arms race and the Cold War. To get a fuller understanding of the time and era I strongly recommend reading American Prometheus too!

I listened to the audiobook format of this book, that means more than 54 hours, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Little content could have been removed. The narration by Nelson Runger was wonderful. I have complained about his slurping before, but the producers have removed the slurps. His steady clear pace perfectly matches the informative text. His intonation for Truman, was perfect, both the strength of his speeches in the presidency and his reflections, to-the-point remarks and sarcastic jokes of the elderly man. Our voice does change with age, and Runger has mastered this. (Some voices were, however, in my opinion, too low and ponderous.) At the end, and this is a book that covers all aspects of Truman's life, from birth to death, i.e. 1884-1972, there were tears in my eyes. This is a book about a man dedicated to fighting for his beliefs, but he was a politician at heart. Keep in mind that I tend to instinctively distrust politicians. It is rather remarkable that I so loved this book. I will try to never again shy away from a book about politicians.....well, at least such books written by John McCullough.

Why did I love this book? You learn about American life and values as they were when America was still a land of pioneers to what it had become by the middle of the 20th Century. What the political parties stood for has changed dramatically with time. On completion of this book you have a thorough understanding of the American party system. You travel from an agrarian Midwest value mindset through WW1, the Depression, the New Deal, WW2, the emergence of atomic weapons, the birth of the UN and NATO, the Berlin blockade and successful airlift, the Cold War and McCarthyism, the focus on civil rights, the Korean War all the way up to Kennedy's presidency. You follow this time-period through the life of a man living through its events, and a man who as president shaped many of these events. McCullough gives you a thorough understanding of all these events and a thorough understanding of the man Truman.

It is an honest book that never shies away from the mistakes made. I wasn't thrilled with Truman's friendship and dependence upon Pendergast. I felt that Truman's relationship with his wife was at first not adequately clarified. By the end I understood Truman, all of him. I believe I comprehend both his familial relationships and the value he put on friendships, which explain his relationship with Pendergast . You see

both the good and the bad. I very much admire the strength and forthrightness of Truman who was at heart a marvelous politician. Yes, definitely a politician who fought for his party and made mistakes, but dam he tried his best. Always. He never shirked his responsibilities. He never ran away from a problem, but faced them head on. He was not infallible. I still don't understand why they never had more children.....

I was born in 1951. I understand now what my parents lived through and why they were who they were. I understand now what lead up to the world I was born into. I totally loved this book.

Elyse says

Sometimes I even laughed.....

Cheers for the late bloomers in life!!! A man after my own heart!!!

Harry's cousin said Harry was 'always' a late bloomer. He did everything a little later than his contemporaries.

He didn't marry until he was 35...so, why would it be crazy to him to first arrive in Washington in his early 50's?

"Harry is a fine man, intelligent, able, and has integrity. He doesn't know much about foreign affairs, but he's learning fast..." --Franklin D Roosevelt

This book gets the reader involved! I listened to hours and hours of the audiobook--

I'm still not done with the audiobook. Eventually I checked out the e-book from the library to speed things along. The e-book and audiobook that I have are not synced together which is not a bad thing. I have reread and re-listened to different parts a few times, and I haven't cared one bit.....being in one part in the book - behind in the audiobook.

Some parts are so personal -- showing us how much Truman loved his mother -respected his father--his love for his wife Bess and daughter Margaret. He was a very hard worker--loved books, music, theater, and quiet time at home. He read the Bible and was a Baptist. Truman loved 'cake' -- and hated 'guns'. There was so much 'warmth' for this man.!!!!

His military experience, knowing how much he hated guns, was gut wrenching to read.

Truman spent 10 years working on a farm - never got a formal College education... but nobody self taught himself more -- other parts give us a greater appreciation and understanding for a critical time in history when Truman was President.

There is so much to pull out of this book --from his early life through the rise of the future President he would become - to the history of the Cold War --scandals challenges--mistakes --an understanding of the dispute between Truman and Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War . Lots of major decisions that he had to make: he had to make decisions with Churchill and Stalin shortly after Roosevelt died. He had to decide to use the atomic bomb on Japan.giving us the history of Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- We learn more about how Truman helped with general Marshall to develop the Marshall plan to revive Europe.....and we got a look at the overall Republican and Democratic party machines and how they work.

There were many times when they were situations when it was easy to see that many of the problems were a

source of egos. Politicians all wanting to be leaders and be right.

I enjoy the subtleties of the inside thoughts of Truman. For example before he was president- (Vice President with FDR as President)....Truman wrote letters home to Bess (his wife), saying "He so damn afraid that he won't have all the power and glory that he won't let his friends help as it should be done". Truman, was a man spoke his mind... had integrity...."a straight shooter".

Truman had been raised I'm straight answers by people who nearly always meant what they said. Roosevelt wasn't that way. --Truman never publicly expressed how he felt, but his biggest objection to President Franklin D Roosevelt was that he lied.

Do we need to wonder what he would think of Trump?

It's impossible to read about past Presidents and not think about our own.

I've watched TV episodes of "Designated Survivor", with Kiefer Sutherland. I remember the first episode, was a shock when Sutherland suddenly became President of the United States. (zero notice).

What was it like for Truman- to wake up one morning - no advance notice and because of the sudden death of Franklin D Roosevelt: just-like-that > Truman was President?/!

Oh my the gossip and the news.....I think would've driven me crazy:

"Good God, Truman will be President", it was being said everywhere. "If Harry Truman can be president, so could my next-door neighbor".

Others knew Truman. They knew what kind of man he was. They knew how entirely honest he was.

"He, of course, has the limitations upon his judgment and wisdom that the limitations of his experience produce, but I think he will learn fast and will inspire confidence. It seems to me that it is a blessing that he is President and not Henry Wallace.

David McCullough is a master at storytelling about our Past Presidents!!! And Truman was a distinctive good man!!!

Mikey B. says

A good and complete biography of Truman. David McCullough describes well the political events surrounding the era and his climb to power – which was gradual but well earned. Truman was only two years younger than Roosevelt but in far better health. He was a vastly different person more prone to indiscretions. Even so he survived well in a turbulent era - the end of World War II, taking the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan, the commencement of the Cold War, the creation of the state of Israel (where he did waffle) and the Korean War. Truman importantly promoted the U.N.

He was not afraid to take decisions, but he could be petulant as in writing to the Washington Post when they

dared to criticize his daughter's musical performance at a concert (this was something Roosevelt would never have done).

I felt the author devoted too many pages to the 1948 campaign (over 60 pages). Very little was said about Truman's efforts to desegregate the armed forces (how much opposition did this receive?) Also I am somewhat perplexed about Truman's marriage to his wife Bess. He did marry quite late – at 35 – which is unusual in that era. Bess did not spend that much time with him in Washington during his Senate and Presidential years when he could have used the emotional support. Also they resided in her mother's house when in Independence, Missouri. For a strong-willed individual Harry Truman seemed to be dominated by both his wife and mother-in-law.

His firing of Douglas MacArthur is well depicted as well as his increasing frustration with Joe McCarthy – where it could be said that it was beneath presidential dignity to deal with such a scoundrel. His friendship with his staff – Clark Clifford, Dean Acheson and the illustrious George Marshall is conveyed. His growing irritation with his successor Eisenhower is interesting.

A portrait of a warm and up-front person emerges – plus that of someone who could quickly grasp new situations and evaluate new personalities (with the exception of Josef Stalin – but he was not alone in this). He was expeditious to root out the “hangers on” of the Roosevelt administration, but did not lose site of the accomplishments of that era.

Matt says

McCullough tackles a political biography sure to reveal much to the reader. For many, Harry Truman is “the president who dropped the bomb” and little else. Any reader who takes the time to digest all that is on offer (a great feat for those who first look at the length of the tome) will soon learn that Truman is much more complex than first presumed. McCullough chooses key moments in Truman's life and expounds on them, one building off the other, leading to a better understanding of why Truman chose to do some of the more controversial things during his almost 8 years in the White House. While extremely detailed at times, McCullough treats the reader to much of the intricate details of the time and brings some of these ‘one-liners’ in the history books to life with exciting narration and key documents/quotes.

The early chapters of the book, understandably, discuss his life on a Missouri farm, his interactions with family and friends, and his plan to coax Elizabeth Wallace to marry him, that fine day he first saw her at Sunday School. When the US goes into The Great War, Truman, already enlisted, heads off to Europe and McCullough documents his perils and successes, as he rises, briefly, in the military before its end in 1918. Returning to America, Truman tries his hand at being a businessman before eventually making strong roots in the state Democratic Party and becoming a presiding judge.

McCullough gives much attention to Truman's various roles on the national political scene. As Chair of a committee to examine American military spending during the war, he is catapulted from unknown junior senator to a Democratic up-and-comer. Still little known, even within his Party, in 1944, Truman becomes an unexpected potential contender for the vice-presidential role on the '44 ticket, with McCullough detailing all the intricacies along the way. A mere 82 days as second in command, FDR's eventual death thrust Truman into the spotlight, a place he was truly not expecting to be. McCullough pulls on much data and history to forge the Truman relationships with Churchill and Truman at Potsdam. While warming immediately to the

British Prime Minister, Truman sees Stalin for the man he is, a power-hungry despot with a perverted communistic outlook. This sentiment is mirrored back in America, as the world watches the three superpowers kick the tires of a defeated Europe. McCullough peppers description of Potsdam with the need to decide on the A-bomb (remember, all this before Truman has had six months at the helm) in such a way that the intensity of both events take an immediate and intense toll on the man.

McCullough's underlying argument, that there is more to the man than a simple smile, comes through in spades as the world moves forward, sitting on the precipice of a Third World War, the COLD WAR. This term, dismissed by Truman, pervades the rest of his time in office and Stalin remains *persona non grata numero uno* throughout. Still, there is much more to be done as both superpowers toss insults and military hurdles at one another. McCullough uses his strong storytelling abilities to lay out much of Truman's domestic, as well as international, policy. Detailed struggles with labour in a post-war America pits Truman against large swaths of the left, alienating some key Democratic support and devastates the party at the 1946 mid-term elections. Facing two Houses in opposition, Truman must push a strong program with strong international flavour to ensure legislative passage. Both the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan come from this highly divisive political period, which paves the way for the 1948 Campaign.

McCullough saves the best research and description for this campaign. Truman has alienated the Party, creating the need for the Dixiecrats, and an apparent sure Republican victory with Thomas Dewey. Minute shifts during the campaign make for sensational reading as the reader absorbs all there is on offer. Interestingly enough, no one (press or public alike) gave Truman a chance in '48, leading to an explosive election-night turnaround.

McCullough posits fleshing out a name for Truman's middle initial, 'S'. At times a strong statesman, Truman carries a torch towards the creation of the State of Israel, highly controversial at the time, both domestically and on the international scene. Alternately, Truman is a simpleton, much less a politician and more a family man who finds himself in a position of great power. Through his numerous letters to family and friends McCullough shows that Truman never forgets those who helped shape him, finding great insights in these letters not well documented in the history books. Personal opinions of other world leaders, fellow members of Congress, and thoughts about the world around him, Truman's inner self comes to the surface. He does not have that typical thirst for power or desire to cut throats to achieve victory.

McCullough goes so far as to present Truman as one who does not see anyone wanting to be president. Worried more about America than his own political success, Truman breaks free from the preconceived notions of president. He seems to ignore the larger political picture, choosing instead to promote Civil Rights, while his party turns on him for such radical ideas.

In the latter part of the book, McCullough devotes much time to the Cold War world in which Truman finds himself. At the helm during the creation of NATO and the UN, Truman uses these bodies to bolster his 'protection of Europe and capitalist values'. When the Korean War emerges out of this ideological tug-of-war, McCullough offers detailed accounts of the fighting and the toll it takes on Truman back in the US. His health takes a hit, as does his personal judgment. A need to 'clean house', both in Korea (with the firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur for speaking out against the Administration) and at home (with cabinet posts and the literal renovation of the White House) leave Truman spiraling downward towards the end of his term in office. That said, an attempted assassination cannot derail his plans to ensure that the Democrats retain the White House, fighting against the greatest hero of the day, Dwight Eisenhower.

The story does not end on January 20th, 1953. McCullough dedicates the last part of the book to the post-POTUS Truman and all that came with it. Truman did not enter the White House a wealthy man, nor was he upon his exit. Looking at life after the spotlight does offer a sobering view of the man and how he coped

with being a regular US citizen again. Wonderfully juxtaposed with his lengthy rise to power in the centre portion of the book, McCullough returns to his tenet that Truman is the everyday man President.

Kudos, Mr. McCullough for such a thorough and entertaining political biography. I took so much away and was enthralled from beginning to end about the man 'who dropped the Bomb'. I can only hope that some of your other work is just as intricate and that I can praise it as highly. Highly recommended for any passionate history buff who wants their eyes opened as much as Robert A. Caro does in his LBJ biography.

Max says

McCullough's engaging portrayal of Harry Truman depicts a man of integrity, a trait rare in politicians. As president, his simple straightforward approach often led to extreme unpopularity. His inexperience and initial indecisiveness took its toll. But Harry Truman's best quality as Clark Clifford noted, "was Harry Truman's capacity to grow." Thrust into a job for which he was ill prepared, Truman overcame his shortcomings working through an onslaught of difficult problems to provide genuine leadership and unlike other presidents, maintain his principles while doing it. Even though unappreciated at the time, Truman proved to be a remarkable president.

McCullough covers every aspect of Truman's life, but here I focus on his presidency and what I found most interesting, Truman's ability to adapt while keeping his values. Truman's character was shaped by hard work and hardship early in life. The same is true of LBJ. Both had fathers who failed financially making both highly motivated to succeed. Yet Truman developed morals while LBJ became Machiavellian, a difference which epitomized both their careers.

Truman was the compromise choice for FDR's VP in 1944, acceptable to North and South, selected primarily on lack of political vulnerabilities rather than consideration of his ability to be president. This is somewhat surprising since FDR's ill health was well known and Henry Wallace was dumped due to pressure from those who could not picture the extreme liberal Wallace as president. FDR let others pick his running mate in one of his typical political dances even though FDR knew his own health was failing. Even more disturbing, FDR did nothing to prepare Truman to assume the presidency, only meeting with him twice and never discussing anything of substance.

When Truman did take over, he was immediately faced with tough foreign policy issues in which he had absolutely no experience; How to end the war and deal with a postwar world with a communist Russia as a major power. His first test was meeting with Churchill and Stalin at the Potsdam conference as the war was winding down. Here, McCullough, whose affection for Truman shows throughout the book, cuts Truman some slack. He cites how well Truman prepared for his meeting with Churchill and Stalin. Truman prepared by reading background material and consulting with his Washington staff and his new Secretary of State Jimmy Byrnes, a former fellow Senator and ill-considered selection also with limited experience. Truman spent little time with his ambassador to Moscow, Averill Harriman (assisted by Kennan), who knew Stalin and Russian politics well. He also disregarded Churchill's warnings about Stalin. Thus Truman approached Stalin idealistically thinking, as Roosevelt did before him, that he could deal with Stalin as a person of good faith. Harriman and his staff knew otherwise. Truman was completely fooled by Stalin. He thought well of Stalin and thought Stalin liked him. Stalin later told Khrushchev he thought Truman was "worthless". Roosevelt and Truman were very different but both greatly overestimated their personal capacity to influence Stalin. Truman as he later admitted was naïve.

Preparation and organization were not hallmarks of Truman's early presidency. Truman reacted to problems as they came rather than rigorously organizing an agenda. His hurriedly crafted a wide ranging liberal program announced upon his return from Potsdam that was not properly vetted or politically evaluated. His lofty propositions were rejected out of hand. Truman was over his head. He neither selected a competent staff he could work with nor did he master the art of delegation.

In foreign affairs he did not establish long term objectives around which to form a coherent policy. His indecisiveness encouraged the Soviet Union to do as it pleased and lost the respect of the American public. Stalin declared publically in February 1946 that Soviet and Western values were incompatible and another war inevitable. Truman reacted by speaking out of both sides of his mouth. Proponents of a hard line Soviet policy such as Admiral Leahy, Forrestal and Dean Acheson were sure the president agreed with them. Advocates of an accommodative policy such as Henry Wallace and Jimmy Byrnes were sure the President agreed with them.

More telling was his equivocation over Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri March 5, 1946. Truman invited Churchill to give the speech and traveled with him to Westminster, introduced him and supported Churchill's hard line position in prior private conversation. Then Truman backtracked publically and completely once wide spread media criticism of Churchill's speech appeared. He even invited Stalin, who he still said he liked, to America to give his own speech which Stalin declined. Just think what would have ensued if Stalin had accepted!

The public perception of the president as weak and befuddled weighed in domestic matters as well. In trying to resolve the 1946 railroad strike, one of many after the war, the president worked out a reasonable compromise. Truman's top assistant, John Steelman, telling labor leaders they had to agree to a fair offer from the President of the United States, was told by them that nobody listened to this President. Ineffective in negotiations Truman decided to draft the strikers into the army. Told he was exceeding his constitutional limits, Truman responded that he wasn't interested in philosophy. Think of a president saying that today! While the Senate voted down his proposed law, his speech to Congress was forceful and popular with the public. But this was followed by embarrassing disarray as Henry Wallace, Truman's Secretary of Commerce, spoke out in direct contradiction of Truman's Soviet policy. After more waffling and again looking weak, Truman finally fired Wallace, but the perception of his presidency was again one of incompetence. By the fall of 1946, his approval rating was 32%. A year earlier it had been 82%.

Truman's fortunes ticked up in 1947 with the appointment of George Marshall as Secretary of State. Marshall was everything Truman hadn't been: organized, a great delegator, a good judge of men. Marshall was also a team player something the man he replaced, Jimmy Byrnes was not. Marshall was respected and his choice reflected well on Truman. He was someone who Truman could work with and who would help him. Having also made Clark Clifford White House Counsel in 1946, with State Department Undersecretary Dean Acheson playing a more prominent role, the ascendance of George Kennan's influence, Averill Harriman, Charles Bohlen and George Elsey staying on, Truman was finally assembling a talented team.

March 1947 marked a turning point when The Truman Doctrine advocating containment of Soviet expansion was presented to Congress and aid for Greece and Turkey requested. The Truman Doctrine was based partly on George Kennan's famous "Long Telegram" and the internal Clifford-Elsey Report. Finally a coherent policy of how to deal with the Soviet Union was being promulgated. This was followed by formulation of the Marshall Plan which recognized America's interest in Europe's economic success. The National Security Act followed in July establishing the CIA, the National Security Council, and the unification of the services under the Secretary of Defense. Truman was leading with huge masterful strokes choreographed by his recently formed and exceedingly loyal staff.

Just as he grew in his ability to craft foreign policy, so he grew in terms of Civil Rights. Coming in with a Southern heritage, in office he realized his country needed to change. He was the first president to address the NAACP. He put forward Civil Rights legislation to abolish the poll tax, outlaw lynching and support equal rights when such a stand in 1948 was unpopular with most voters. Later he issued an executive order to end discrimination in the armed forces and the civil service.

He handled the issue of the partition of Palestine and recognition of Israel reasonably well, given a heatedly divided staff. Truman hesitated; looking wobbly again, but in the end came through. His Secretary of State, the extremely popular General Marshall, was adamantly opposed, but with deference and patience, Truman was able to get him to acquiesce and the US became the first nation to recognize Israel. This was also politically expedient. Truman's response to the Soviet blockade of Berlin was smart and effective. The blockade could have easily led to capitulation or conversely war. Truman threaded the needle with his long term airlift which his advisors told him wouldn't work.

Truman's 1948 campaign is the signature event in his career, his fortitude overcoming all odds, his persistence proving the naysayers wrong. It is unusual in national politics to see one person so right in his course, so confident in his decisions, when virtually every pundit, every poll was against him. Dewey helped, overconfident and not personable, running a lackluster campaign. Truman knew how to take advantage and he did it by standing for the things he really believed in. His authenticity connected with the American people.

Truman's second term brought no respite. Only restraint and persistence saw him through. Russia acquiring the atomic bomb, the decision to develop the H-bomb, the Klaus Fuchs atomic secrets spy scandal, Joe McCarthy's lists of "communist infiltrators", North Korea's invasion of South Korea and last but far from least Douglas MacArthur's public defiance. As Truman related in retrospect, he was probably too patient with MacArthur. He and the country would have been better off if he had fired MacArthur months earlier. Truman deserves kudos for leadership. Firing MacArthur was extremely unpopular and Truman accepted the heat. He wasn't devious, no FDR shell games. He fired MacArthur straight out knowing the firestorm of protest that awaited him.

Truman left office unloved and unwanted (22% approval, Nixon had 24% when he left office) by a public lost in McCarthyism and the tail fins growing on their cars. Only time would reveal his true legacy. Cast in a role he never envisioned, he got off to a shaky start, but in the end he held his own in the most demanding times in the most demanding job in the world even if the public did not appreciate it. And he did it the right way, without resorting to deceit, backhand deals and quid pro quos. He guided America through many complex and dangerous challenges. We in America were very fortunate to have him as our president. Truman was a great leader and McCullough's book is a great testament to his accomplishments.

Christine says

David McCullough is a master, plain and simple. Who else could make a 992 page paperback biography compulsively readable? I knew essentially nothing about Harry Truman before reading this biography, and now I think he might be my favorite president. Truly a man of the people, who never let the highest office in the country go to his head, Truman made difficult decisions that would have crippled other men within the first four months of his presidency. While not all of his policies were popular during his time, most have been shown to be the right course of action in hindsight. His decision to use the atomic bomb to end World

War II lay heavily on conscience, and because of that he was reluctant to ever use it again. Because of this, even with public outcry growing, he refused to use the atomic bomb or the newly developed H-bomb in Korea. Truman was a man of his principles, who put the good of the nation and the people who lived in it before the good of his own public image. I think all of our modern leaders could learn some valuable lessons about public service by following the example of Harrison S. Truman.

Marc says

" 'Harry, don't you sometimes feel overwhelmed by your job?' he had been asked by Republican Senator Tobey of New Hampshire, and Truman had stepped to the globe and turning it slowly said, 'All the world is focusing on this office. The nearest thing to my heart is to do something to keep the world at peace. We must find a way to peace, or else civilization will be destroyed and the world will turn back to the year 900.' "

Ambitious in scale, widely researched, McCullough's 992 pages long biography of Truman was a great read. The author relies a lot on the public and private correspondence of the president to unfold his life story from 19th century post civil war Missouri to the highs of Cold War era Washington D.C.

The book gave me the impression of a calculating yet principled man who was able to adapt to various contexts throughout his long public career. From a card playing, bourbon drinking, Kansas City Machine hand picked protégé to a self righteous New Deal Coalition president.

Fred Bomer says

Fascinated by the detail and Mr. McCullough's ability to transport me back to the time period. Additionally, I am developing a tremendous respect for Mr. Truman's civility and dedication to "correctness" and his tremendous respect for others. -

Time well spent - Excellent book in detail, narrative and storyline! I have really enjoyed this book and recommend it to anyone wanting both historical information and an understanding of the unchanging nature of Politics!!!

Michael says

Excellent read for lining up all the threads of a great leader's life in a narrative that flows like the story from a novel. Even at 1,000 pages, so much history passed through Truman's hands that major events such as the decision to bomb Hiroshima and the Korean War have to slip by with only a few pages. What comes through as a thread in the whole tapestry is the fundamental decency of the man, a pragmatism typical of farmers who face diverse challenges day by day, and a core belief in fairness for all and a distaste for wealthy privilege. His empathy for the poor was based on his own experience of the farming life and early business failures. His racist language is downplayed in relation to his efforts as president to support a Jewish State and steps toward civil rights. His political origins through the Pendergast machine in Kansas City taught him how to use and live with a patronage system, but it also seems to have given him enough knowledge of corruption and moneyed power to make his name exposing corruption as a senator and to be vigilant about influence buying while a president. Got to appreciate a fellow who hated Hoover and McCarthy from the get go. He

saw enough war as an artillery captain in World War 1 to hate war, but was effective enough at it to inform his role as Commander in Chief during both the end of World War 2 and the Korean War. Despite a conception of Truman as hot tempered, his restraint was often remarkable. For example, the impulse to fire McArthur immediately for pushing in the media for a war with China was tempered by waiting for assessment of his value from a military perspective by the Joint Chiefs.
