



**Robert H. Ferrell.** *Harry S. Truman and the Cold War Revisionists.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. viii + 142 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1653-3.

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Robert H. Ferrell and the Cold War Revisionists: A Radically Wrong Interpretation

The subject of this extended essay is, in part, a “school” of historians Robert H. Ferrell first encountered in the mid-1950s. A seminar on U.S. foreign relations at the University of Kansas served as the occasion for that encounter. Among the speakers was William Appleman Williams, a young University of Wisconsin historian and former naval officer who had served in the Pacific during World War II. Williams’s paper focused on the theme that was shortly to make him one of the most celebrated and vilified historians of his generation—the Open Door thesis. Chosen to respond first to the paper, Ferrell, as he recounts the event, professed utter amazement that such a monocausal interpretation could be put forth from a generation “brought up on a historical diet of the essays of Beard and Becker, which taught that historical truths are relative” (p. 5). That Ferrell saw the Open Door thesis then, and still sees it now, as a monocausal interpretation of U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War and elsewhere demonstrates that he never understood Cold War revisionism and that he continues not to.

Such mischaracterizations of the Cold War revisionists are prevalent throughout this polemic. We learn, for instance, that Williams and Lloyd Gardner, a one-time student of Williams, are “socialists” (which apparently is

supposed to mean something about their scholarship) but not much that enhances our understanding of what the Cold War revisionists were actually arguing, *especially* for younger generations unfamiliar with the debates and for whom this book might otherwise have been most useful. According to Ferrell, all of the following apply to the revisionists: they were economic determinists (pp. 6-7); they were dishonest in their historical methods (pp. 9-10, 35-36); they had not experienced WWII or the beginning of the Cold War and so were ill equipped to “understand the time” about which they wrote (pp. viii, 3); they used sneaky tactics to lure readers in and confuse them (pp. 9-11); they were an incestuous lot, oft-quoting each other’s work (p. 11); they wrote their histories and drew their conclusions on insufficient evidence, because documents were not yet released (pp. 11-12); they hated capitalism (p. 7); they did not much like their elders (pp. 4-5); they were shallow because of their adherence to “one-cause history” (p. 5); they made the evidence fit their thesis rather than let the evidence be their guide (pp. 12-13); and they likely only got the attention they did because at the time that they emerged “anyone with brains and ambition could attain the titles of doctor and professor” (pp. 3-4). This might be interesting, if it could be proven. But such charges have been made against the revisionists in the past and they have never stuck, except for those who want them to.[1] The point here is not that the revision-

ists are right and Ferrell wrong; rather it is merely that we have been down this road before. Those who want to believe these claims about the Cold War revisionists will be convinced; those who believe that there is far more subtly, nuance, and complexity to revisionist arguments than Ferrell sees will not be. And with that we are right back to 1973!

Given this, the temptation is to end the review here, for what is the point? The problem is that Ferrell's demeanor throughout the book is so condescending that no self-respecting reviewer could let it go without pointing out some of the book's flaws. Surely the revisionists could not have been as misguided as Ferrell contends (as when he says, in introducing the revisionists in the opening line of the preface, that "every now and then a notion or idea arises that is radically wrong") and still have had successful academic careers (p. vii). Unfortunately, Ferrell makes the task of assessing revisionist positions next to impossible because he rarely cites sources for his claims about the revisionists. The revisionists are guilty of this or that despicable fallacy of historical interpretation, but do not expect to be able to return to the original sources to test Ferrell's assessment. In most cases he does not provide them. Examples abound. For instance, he writes that "Alperovitz, Williams, and Gardner interpreted the sudden cutting off of lend-lease on May 12, 1945, as the use of crude pressure by the Truman administration" (p. 25), but provides no footnotes. Or, in another example, "the revisionists believed that the wartime effort to keep a secret from the Russians was itself almost enough to ensure the postwar breakup of the grand alliance and that only an immediate postwar offer to discuss the problem could have atoned for it" (p. 24). Again, footnotes are nowhere to be found. Thus, one must just take Ferrell at his word when he makes a claim about revisionism. And, since he informs us that he "found it difficult to believe any of their [the revisionists] arguments," some of us might be excused if we do not let Ferrell serve as our guide for understanding a school of history that has so influenced the way we write and teach about U.S. foreign policy (on that score, too, I guess, all of us who have found some wisdom in Cold War revisionism have just been duped). In addition, he makes sloppy mistakes that, if committed by the revisionists, would be certain to prove their lack of professionalism. For instance, at one point Ferrell writes (and here he agrees with the revisionists) that "the Greek guerillas were not receiving help from Stalin" (p. 29). And yet, in another, in referring to the Turkish situation, he writes: "The Turkish foreign situation differed from that in Greece in that the Rus-

sians were not employing guerillas" in Turkey (p. 31). So, which is it? He also makes great hay in pointing out that some of the earlier revisionist works were making their claims without the benefit of the archives, since in the early 1970s the State Department records were only open through 1947. It is an interesting point and one would like to have seen a specific instance referenced, which he does not offer. But what Ferrell does not get is that, if this is true of the revisionists, so was it true of the traditionalists. One thinks here of Herbert Feis's *From Trust to Terror* which came out in 1970. Ferrell nonetheless quotes it approvingly throughout his essay. Ferrell also claims that revisionism ended with the northern victory in Vietnam, implying that politics, not honest historical inquiry, was the engine driving revisionist accounts of the Cold War's origins (p. 35). That certainly would be news to Walter LaFeber, whose *America, Russia, and the Cold War* is now in its tenth edition and updated through 2006; or to Thomas McCormick whose *America's Half-Century*, first published in 1989 with a second edition in 1994, is considered a key text on the Cold War; or to Thomas Paterson who built his career on the Cold War with such books as *On Every Front* (1979) and *Meeting the Communist Threat* (1988). Nor does it do justice to many of the new scholars of the Cold War who were influenced by the revisionists. Scholars such as Michael Hogan, Melvyn Leffler, William Borden, Andrew Rotter, Carolyn Eisenberg, James Gromly, Daniel Yergin, Lawrence Wittner, Richard Immerman, and Frank Kofsky, to name but a few.

Getting down to specifics, Ferrell chastises the revisionists for their positions on the Truman "reverse course," the atomic bomb and atomic diplomacy, the division of Germany, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, and, to a lesser extent, NATO and Korea. Those interested can read for themselves how Ferrell treats these subjects but one example will suffice to demonstrate the level of his scholarship. Ferrell claims that the revisionists were wrong to blame the United States for dividing Germany, noting that "it is clear that in any fair election East Germany would have voted to unite with the West" (p. 34). But here he fails to recognize that the issue was not free elections, certainly not those alone. As Carolyn Eisenberg has detailed in her book *Drawing the Line* (1997), a work that does not make it into Ferrell's bibliography, the issue was violation by the United States of the Allied Control Council and four-power control over Germany bolstering Soviet suspicions and fears leading to the breakdown of U.S.-Soviet relations. This because U.S. officials had determined that a rebuilt Germany, or however much of it they could get, was essential

to the restoration of the European economy, which, in turn, was necessary for the health of the American economy, the Russians, not to mention the East Germans, be damned.

One more word about the book's flaws. Just how truly hollow this book is emerges in chapter 3, which is entitled "Diplomacy without Armaments." It is an odd chapter in that it says nothing about the revisionists and very little about Harry S. Truman. The point of the chapter is to remind readers just how weakened U.S. military forces were between 1945 and 1950, although in this Ferrell exaggerates a great deal. Armed forces personnel had been greatly reduced. Conventional weapons production had practically ceased. The nuclear shield offered by U.S. monopoly of the atomic bomb was really no shield at all given production and delivery inconsistencies. Military budgets were kept low due to fears of inflation. In short, Western Europe was frighteningly vulnerable. The Soviets could have marched at any time and the United States and its allies would have been able to do nothing but retreat. What this information has to do with Cold War revisionism Ferrell never says. Perhaps, by pointing it out, he thinks that revisionism will look silly by comparison; there were real threats and fears, he is saying, not the "illusions" that revisionists talked about. But, here he also fails to see how his own argument only confirms that of the revisionists. American leaders, Truman included, disarmed in the immediate aftermath of WWII, not solely because the nation had been victorious and was war weary, but also because they did not fear a military attack from the Soviet Union or anyone else in Europe. Of course, as the revisionists pointed out, that did not stop them from using the image of a Soviet attack in order to gain support for policies, such as the Marshall Plan, that had really nothing to do with the Soviet Union. But Ferrell, for the life of him, just cannot see it. "What held off the Soviets," he asks at chapter's end, "persuading them not to move while the advantage was on their side, is at present difficult to say" (p. 32). Except that maybe, just maybe, the Soviet Union was in no position to overrun Western Europe, due to the destruction it had faced during the war, nor was it inclined to do so, revisionist positions that new evidence has largely backed up.[2]

All this aside, the true aim of Ferrell's book, it turns out, is not really the revisionists but his beloved President Truman. After the first two chapters the revisionists largely fade away and the focus becomes what a great president Truman was and how, unlike the general public, historians are slow on the uptake in realizing this. That is, except for Truman biographers David McCul-

lough, Alonzo Hamby, and, of course, Ferrell himself, each of whom, he assures us, possess the "right point of view" (p. 108).[3] Readers can decide for themselves whether this exercise in hagiography has any merit.

One more issue needs to be addressed. What about Ferrell's charge that the Open Door thesis was "monocausal" history? Since this has always been the antirevisionists' piece de resistance for debunking revisionism, and since Ferrell has raised the issue again, this would be an appropriate place to bury this myth once and for all (though I harbor no illusions that in this endeavor I will succeed). First, it is important to note that when antirevisionists talk of monocausal history what they really mean is that the revisionists were economic determinists, which really means that they were Marxists (which we are all supposed to know is just wrong) who held that impersonal forces more than individuals shaped the course of history, *except* for when they did not; Ferrell is not certain himself (pp. 7, 13). For Ferrell, suffice it to say that the revisionists' one cause history could be boiled down to "a belief that American commercial expansion was the root cause of the cold war" (p. 6). To argue this way is, however, to seriously misunderstand Williams's theory of the *weltanschauung*. Williams, and other revisionists, always insisted that it was not necessarily a fact that America needed overseas markets to ensure domestic tranquility. Rather, it was the *belief* that it did that propelled American expansion abroad. This is what a *weltanschauung* is, a belief or worldview that encompasses cultural, social, ideological, and, yes, economic elements. To reduce revisionism to a crude economic determinism is to miss this basic fact. The very application of a *weltanschauung* to American leaders demonstrates that Williams was no economic determinist. In Williams's formulation American leaders were not men moved by impersonal forces. (Incidentally, this is why John Lewis Gaddis was wrong when he claimed that the revisionists employed a "Leninists model of imperialism".[4]) Their conception of their nation's history caused them to view expansion as an imperative and they acted accordingly. No one has to agree with the concept but economic determinism it is not.[5]

Furthermore, while the revisionists did emphasize economic factors, and at times even may be accused of exaggerating them, they did not do so to the exclusion of other factors. They were, at long last in terms of American historical writing, merely pointing out that the economic aspect had been neglected, not just in the origins of the Cold War but, really, throughout the country's history, or, at least, as that history was being served up to

postwar America. But never did the revisionists, as their critics asserted, subscribed solely to an economic interpretation of American foreign policy. Consider, for instance, LaFeber's first book *The New Empire* (1998), which Ferrell invokes precisely to demonstrate that the revisionists' were monocausal historians (p. 5). A quick review of LaFeber's table of contents lists, among others, the following chapters: "The Strategic Formulation," "The Intellectual Formulation," and "The Economic Formulation." And, the first two are not reducible to the last. As to the origins of the Cold War, the revisionists did a great service by pointing out the economic underpinnings motivating U.S. foreign policy. No one can argue any longer and be taken seriously that one of the U.S.'s primary goals in the postwar era was not the creation of an open, global, economy satisfactory to American domestic interests. Both traditionalists and revisionists speak now of a postwar American empire, albeit from different angles. Whether, as Gaddis once put it, "economic instruments were used to serve political ends" or whether the reverse is true, as revisionists would have it, is a debate that will likely never be solved to everyone's satisfaction nor should it be.[6] The point here is that everyone but Ferrell now accepts that economics played a role in U.S. foreign policy during the early Cold War as at other times. Difference resides only in how much emphasis one gives to it over other factors. That revisionists emphasized economics no more makes them monocausal in their approach than does Gaddis's emphasis on secu-

rity or Ferrell's on Trumania.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert James Maddox, *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) is the greatest attack on Cold War revisionism from the earlier period; and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 447-457 details why that attack failed.

[2]. Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

[3]. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

[4]. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 7 (July 1983): 171-244.

[5]. Williams Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

[6]. Gaddis, "Emerging Post-revisionist Synthesis," 175.

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