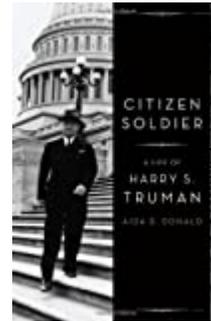




Aida D. Donald. *Citizen Soldier: A Life of Harry S. Truman.* New York: Basic Books, 2012. xvi + 265 pp. \$26.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03120-7.



Reviewed by Autumn Lass (Texas Tech)

Published on H-War (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

A Look Inside the Life of President Truman

Aida D. Donald's biography, *Citizen Soldier*, traces the key moments in Harry S. Truman's personal and political life. Her approach is not solely a narrative of his life but also a psychological study of the major events and decisions that shaped his psyche and his eventual presidency. Donald uses four major periods in Truman's life: the informative years, World War I experiences, entrance into politics, and finally his presidency. For each of these major periods, she emphasizes that Truman was a man of integrity who worked hard to accomplish his goals.

Donald begins Truman's story with an analysis of his early life. She argues that Truman's relationship with his mother, Martha, was very important in shaping him. His close relationship with Martha made him shy and often awkward around other boys his own age. Truman's father's lack of farming and business success also influenced him. Donald contends that Truman saw his father, John, repeatedly fail, which not only put pressure on Truman to succeed but also often prevented him from pursuing his own dreams. She illustrates that his long-time love Bess Wallace served as a compass for his entire

life. Finally, Truman's early adulthood much like his father's was full of disappointments and business failures. Therefore, Truman jumped at the chance to remake himself when World War I began.

Entering World War I and later politics were two of Truman's most important decisions, according to Donald. She states that Truman's war was the petri dish for his later political leadership. And while the war would destroy a generation of European men, it would make a man of Truman (p. 35). World War I provided him with the leadership experience and masculine camaraderie that became the cornerstone of his political successes in Missouri and later in Washington. Overall, since World War I gave Truman his first real successes, he always looked at that period as one of the most constructive times in his life.

Donald paints Truman as a new man upon his return to Missouri after the war (p. 65). He was finally able to marry Bess and begin the life he had dreamed. Yet his business endeavors continued to fail; it was not

until the Pendergast machine offered him a local county judgeship that Truman finally found his niche in politics. Donald argues that Truman was psychologically divided during his early political life with the Pendergast machine. He was torn between behaving ethically and having to be minimally corrupt (p. 80). This tension is seen best in his Pickwick Hotel papers. Eventually his connection to the machine led to Truman Washington. He became a national senator in 1935. During his first term, Truman struggled to break free of the Pendergast association. Donald contends that he was a maverick New Dealer because he accepted aspects of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal while openly resisting others (p. 111). Truman finally achieved success in Washington when he was appointed to head the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, which ferreted out monetary waste and corruption in military spending. It is this appointment that drew the attention of President Roosevelt when he was deciding on his vice presidential candidate in the mid-1940s.

Although never planning to become president, Truman quickly found himself in that position. With no training and purposely left out of wartime planning by President Roosevelt, Truman was thrust into the position of a wartime president and had to learn quickly how to wage war. He immediately faced the decision to use the atomic bomb and the task of rebuilding the postwar world. Donald's assessment of Truman's presidency and issues like the atomic decision, the Cold War, and the Korean War mirrors similar discussions of previous

biographies.

Donald ends her biography with a brief summary of Truman's postpresidential years and a brief analysis of his presidential legacy. While he had marginal success domestically, Truman was successful in his foreign policies. According to Donald, his legacy should not be one of failures and lackluster accomplishments but one of a man who had to learn to be president on the job and worked feverishly to improve his abilities in office.

Intended more for the general readership than for scholars, Donald's biography is well written and excels at explaining how key events, like Truman's World War I experience, his connection to the Pendergast machine, and his accidental presidency, shaped his worldview and presidency. Donald's work provides a deeper psychological glimpse into the most important experiences in Truman's life. While much of the biography echoes previous debates and questions, her use of the Pickwick papers contributes the most insightful look into Truman's psychological struggle with the Pendergast machine. She skillfully shows that while he immensely detested being connected to political corruption, he also recognized that the machine gave him new opportunities to succeed.

Overall, Donald's biography highlights both the man and president. *Citizen Soldier* elevates Truman and his presidency and concludes that Truman was a triumphant near-great president who has often been underappreciated and undervalued (p. 239).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Autumn Lass. Review of Donald, Aida D., *Citizen Soldier: A Life of Harry S. Truman*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38663>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.