

The Year of Indecision, 1946: A Tour Through the Crucible of Harry Truman's America

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A vivid account of America at the pivot point of the postwar era, Harry Truman's first full year in office

In 1946, America had just exited the biggest war in modern history and was about to enter another of a kind no one had fought before. We think of this moment as the brilliant start of America Triumphant, in world politics and economics. But the reality is murkier: 1946 brought tension between industry and labor, political disunity, bad veteran morale, housing crises, inflation, a Soviet menace—all shadowed by an indecisiveness that would plague decision makers who would waffle between engagement and isolation, as the country itself pivoted between prosperity and retrenchment, through the rest of the century.

The Year of Indecision, 1946 overturns the image of Truman as a can-do leader—1946, in fact, marked a nadir in his troubled presidency. Relations broke down with the Soviet Union, and nearly did with the British. The United States suffered shortages and strikes of a magnitude it had not seen in years. In November 1946, the Democrats lost both houses of Congress. The tension between fear and optimism expressed itself too in popular culture. Americans rejoiced in talent and creative energy, but a shift was brewing: Bing Crosby making room for Bill Haley and B.B. King; John Wayne for Montgomery Clift. That year also saw a burst of spirit in literature, music, art and film—beneath the shadow of noir.

The issues and tensions we face today echo those of seven decades ago. As we observe in this portrait of the era just before our own, as America learned, piecemeal and reluctantly, to act like a world power, it tried, and succeeded only partially, to master fear. Indecision, Weisbrode argues, is the leitmotif of American history.

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Date : Published March 1st 2016 by Viking

ISBN : 9780670016846

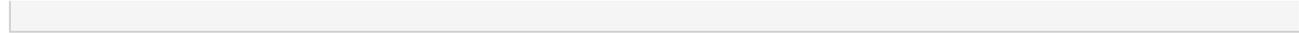
Author : Kenneth Weisbrode

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : History, Politics, North American Hi..., American History, Biography

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From Reader Review *The Year of Indecision, 1946: A Tour Through the Crucible of Harry Truman's America* for online ebook

Franklin Wong says

This is an interesting read about the uncertainties facing the United States in the mid- to late 1940s. The subtitle of the book is probably the more appropriate one, as the book does not mention a lot about, let alone focus on, the year 1946. The author intended to cover a lot, but with mixed results, in which some chapters are much better than the others (chapters 4, 6 and 10 are good reads).

Joshua Buhs says

Too fuzzy to be useful, I think.

Weisbrode wants to explain that much-forgotten era, the immediate post-War in America. (In the popular imagination, the country jump-cuts from VJ-day to the Cleavers in Levittown.) That's all to the good. The problem here is that his argument is simultaneously too diffuse and too focused.

The too-focused bit is obvious in the structure, and content. Weisbrode offers a very old-fashioned kind of history. He wants to discuss *the* American culture of the time, *the* American mind. And so for a good half of the book, he offers a political history of the era, focusing especially on Truman and the Truman administration. For such a slight book that presumes to detail an entire era, there was, for me, entirely too much political and diplomatic history.

The upshot here, though, is that Truman embodied--or set forth, it's never quite clear the cause and effect--the era's dominant ethos, one of indecision. (This in contrast, explicitly, to Bernard Devoto's book, on 1846 "The Year of Decision.") One of Weisbrode's main points is to rescue Truman from the hagiographic revisionism of David McCullough's quarter-century-old biography: Truman was not a complicated man trying the best he could but a simpleton--Weisbrode compares him to George W. Bush--who was too quick to anger, too simple to think things through.

The only reason his choices weren't as bad as Bush's were because he had better advisors. (Weisbrode takes a long time setting these up in to different camps, depending upon how they related to FDR.) Truman punted on most important decisions, did just enough to get by, and--in Weisbrode's opinion--only fortunately kept America together and forced later generations to deal with the problems he did not solve. From my perspective, this seems to give the president too much credit (or blame, whatever), but I am not really in a position to judge.

At any rate, nothing here particularly stood out as a profound reworking of the era, though Weisbrode tried hard. He introduced new terms for old concepts, clearly hoping they would catch on. America wasn't really an empire, he says--the job of maintaining world security was taken on reluctantly: "American troops would return to, and stay in, Europe and Asia, but they were neither conquerors nor liberators. They were, to put it baldly, insurance agents against aggression, as it was said, or simply against fear" (page 20). Any resemblance to the White Man's Burden is, I suspect, entirely *not* coincidental. And so rather than "empire" America is said to have created a global archipelago of the places where its military footprint was embedded. Similarly, he replaces McCarthyism--which he is against--with the term Poujades, an obscure

reference whose only point seems to be that Weisbrode knows obscure references.

Given this focus on *the* American mind, it should come as no surprise that non-white, non-men receive only glancing attention. Indecisiveness *may* have been the sine qua non of Truman's administration (or it may not have been), but it's hard to interpret this generation of black leaders, for example, as indecisive. (See John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day*.) Anxiety certainly was part of the labor movement and art history at this juncture--and Weisbrode deals with both--but there were also strongly positive developments, too, in each arena.

Indeed, one wonders about the utility of a historical category such as indecision or anxiety, only because most eras, if not all, had reasons to be anxious and indecisive about something. So was indecision really the defining characteristic of the second-half of the forties, or did Weisbrode just cherry-pick examples. It's hard to say.

In part that difficulty arises from Weisbrode's fuzziness. The book is no straight-forward but written in what I think of as a voice of mock-profundity: that speaking in abstractions is proof of one's clear-sightedness. Rather, for me, the generalities make it hard to know what was happening on the ground, what it felt like to be alive during the 1940s. In this sense, the first chapter, which recounts the difficulty soldiers had in readjusting to American Society, and American Society in accepting them back, is a false advertisement for the rest of the book. It's the best, most grounded chapter, showing indecision--anxiety might be a better term--could have been a central feature of mainstream American culture.

The rest of the book never really lives up to this, though--or down to it, as it were, since the book chooses to live up in a world of abstractions. Here he is on the New York art scene:

"It may or may not have been dialectical. The culture of the city and the world it represented was sharper: its juxtapositions had become more personal. There was too much guilt for clarity--not merely survivor's guilt, but also a murkier feeling that the war was somehow America's fault, or that it had not entered the war, nor exited it, with an entirely clean conscience. . . . Unlike their counterparts in Europe, for whom the postwar era signified a new optimism and survival meant that all they represented was not extinct, many American artists entered their golden age with an eye fixed over their shoulder" (168).

Underlying the fuzzy abstractions--guilt, clarity--is Weisbrode's psychological view of history: that there is an American mind, and it is subject to the same pathologies as a human mind. And beyond that are questionable interpretations--post-War Europe was unequivocally optimistic, and unconcerned with the past, really?--that glide by because they are abstractions, generalities that would never hold up to sustained investigation of individuals. The psychology and abstractions are here, too, in his (sigh) repeat of the criticism that American culture was too permissive (121).

The overwhelming feeling here is that Weisbrode read into the forties all sorts of his own anxieties, and that worried that nobody did what he wanted them to do--though he leaves unexplained what he thinks the right course of action should have been. The best I can make out is that Americans should not have tried to hide their fears, but confronted them straight on and solved their problems. I get the sense that he wanted America to unapologetically take over the management of the globe, but he is too coy to be sure.

At any rate, it is impossible to imagine a perfectly set, sound, and consistent set of policies in a country that is diverse and pluralistic. Fuzzy as Weisbrode's desires are, they rely on a politics that is moved by a single mind, and that's not just an abstraction, it's a fantasy.

Arminius says

I wasn't that impressed with this book. It covered Harry Truman's presidency in detail and society in less detail. In Music 1946 was the year the Big Band era was replaced by the "Crooner's" such as Frank Sinatra and Johnny Mercer. Oscar Hammerstein's musicals were in their hey day in these years with plays such as "It Might as Well Be Spring." Hollywood also boomed at this time. Superstars such as Robert Mitchum, Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster and Joan Crawford emerged.

President Truman first term as president was from 1945 -1949. In that time, he had created the "Truman Doctrine" which attempted to thwart Soviet Union aggression by assisting beleaguered nations to combat Soviet attempted invasions. He also created the "Marshall Plan" which gave 120 billion dollars in economic support to help rebuild Western European economies after the end of World War II. In addition, he signed the National Security Act which merging the Department of War and the Department of the Navy into the National Military Establishment (later the Department of Defense) and creating the U.S. Air Force. The act also created the CIA and the National Security Council.

One of the most important acts Truman did was to contact former President Herbert Hoover. Truman asked Hoover to travel around the world to evaluate the "hunger problem firsthand". Hoover, became the new honorary chairman of the Famine Emergency Committee, estimated the world's immediate needs at eleven million tons of cereals and three million tons of fats. He also used American and other nations food supplies to save millions of Western Europeans from starvation.

Harry Truman left Office as one of the most unpopular presidents in modern history but time has rejuvenated his legacy and is now regarded as one of our greatest Presidents.

Jim Blessing says

I liked the section on Harry Truman, but after this the book got bogged down and I lost interest.

James says

Weisbrode's book feels less like reading about history than listening to someone talk about an era with not only deep knowledge but a fair bit of wit. In many ways, the book argues that Truman (and many Americans of his era) valued the idea of decisiveness over the less satisfying--but often wiser--process of working through problems thoughtfully. It also suggests that the USA often gets away with such decisiveness because of preponderance--even poorly thought-out policies are sometimes successful due to the sheer amount of money/military might/etc...directed towards them. The author suggests all this while offering entertaining observations of historic figures, including Truman, who he clearly thinks is over-rated--even to the point of comparing him with W. More of a meditation of the era and America in general than a traditional history, this book is one of the more thought-provoking reads I've run across recently.

Roger says

Any book, by definition, must be a labor of love, or why else would someone devote the time and effort to what can be an arduous and typically thankless task. That said, I really dislike giving such a negative appraisal, but I do not know what this book adds to our understanding and discussions of the postwar world.

I get it, the author believes most politicians and policymakers after WWII were underprepared, overrated, and probably overwhelmed. So, the American century wasn't so much created as it just happened, the product of "indecision" and the lack of any coherent plan developed by a strong vision. The argument, however, is more asserted than proved, the product of a superficial judgmentalism that would be right at home in the 1940s.

Harry Truman is especially a victim of this facile judgmentalism, just as he was during his own time. Truman was an autodidact who mispronounced many words, because he had never heard them, only read them in his voracious reading. The Ivy League elite that dominated government bureaucracies and Wall Street at the time, and now, derided him for his unpolished speech, rather than recognizing a curious mind that overcame cultural barriers. This author returns to that old Ivid prism. Truman had his flaws, but he wasn't the stereotype presented in this book. Same too, with many others, including Clark Clifford, who is described as a pedestrian thinker, which is not the impression one receives when reading his memoirs. In fact, seemingly everyone with any influence is derided for their ulterior motives. No one actually means what they say or believes in anything true and virtuous, except perhaps George Marshall. The author assumes an Olympian us vs. them paradigm, with the "us", a small group that includes himself, always knowing better.

Why focus on 1946? I still do not know. The author covers the entirety of the last half of the 1940s, and often dips into contemporary observations. Every once in awhile there is a reminder that the title includes 1946, but the reminders are artificial. The best line comes only at the very end, when the author writes-- "To insist over and over again that the buck stops here risked that people might actually believe it. Thus Truman got much of the blame, even when his choices were the right ones." This observation seems more true of 1952 than 1946, but it does offer the kind of nuanced analysis usually missing in this book. Too bad this wasn't the norm.

Vic Lauterbach says

This study of America immediately after World War II starts off well with a profile of Harry Truman, the "accidental president," and his cabinet, amid the political turmoil of the post-war recession. In the middle, however, the narrative wanders off into the sociological weeds, and the book never really recovers. At its best, and there are some very good sections that reminded me of Frederick Lewis Allen's "The Big Change" (1952), but there's too much shallow survey history that reads like a "remember when" magazine article. Overall, if this period interests you, I recommend reading a good Truman biography instead.

Edward says

I read this book despite its less than enthusiastic reviews because I was curious about the political and cultural climate during a period that I was born into but only much later experience its aftereffects in the 60's

and 70's. At a personal level, it did provide some insight into what ordinary people like my parents might have been experiencing at the time.

The author has divided his book into twelve chapters, each preceded by an editorial epigraph from Harper's monthly magazine to coincide with the monthly progression through 1946. It appears his intention was to provide some contemporary sentiment to the larger subject that of that the particular chapter. In retrospect, this symbolic device may be more of an attempt to reign in the reader's attention because the author's excursions involving individual personalities can dilute his intention to achieve a comprehensive summary of the political and cultural climate of the period.

Despite the author's paradigm, he moves in time about the focal point of 1946 with its primary concentration within five years around that year. Occasional attenuated excursions back to the Wilson era and forward to the Regan, Bush and Clinton era are made to provide historical context for the political and diplomatic thinking associated with Truman administration. The author tries to capture the mood of the Nation's policymakers which the author assumes is reflective of its citizens, both of whom are characterized as being angst-filled and indecisive. Despite the planning for the post-war period during the latter part of Roosevelt's administration, the transition and the decision on how to best move the nation and the world forward were ameliorative as well as indecisive.

The author attempts to envelop a period of time by providing a cultural and political picture of what was happening at or near the boundaries of history rather than concentrating on the detail at the core of the decision making process. The latter would have necessitated a more academic history to support his assertions, and he does make some such as how the US would choose to project its power post-war as he explains through the analogy of an archipelago.

Three quarters into the text, the chapter titled New York takes a literary turn from the mainstream flow involving the periphery of political and economic issues following WWII. This chapter may seem out of place but the author uses the vehicle of literature to convey a broad view of the cultural sentiment of America at the time. New York then has a far different personality than that of today. He again does this in a later chapter using Film Noir as a vehicle to show that popular culture reflects the uneasiness particular to that era.

An unconventional footnote system is used and is based on relating quotations on a page to a reference in the notes at the back of the book that is organized by chapter and page number. While it takes some getting used to. Although it may be less obtrusive to the reader and provides some color to the author's narrative, it feels as though the source of the author's views may lie elsewhere.

Michael says

I received this book through a Goodreads "First-Reads" Giveaway. Not what I was expecting based on the title of the book. This book is not a historical narrative of a single year. Instead, the author focuses on certain persons, places, and events (some of which occur in 1946, some of which don't), as he explores America coming to terms with being a post-war power, understanding and defining what exactly that meant, and the fear and indecision that plagued both our political leadership and the populace as a whole as they struggled (lurched?) through this transitional period. I found the narrative structure to be a bit disjointed and distracting at times for my taste but an interesting read nonetheless.

