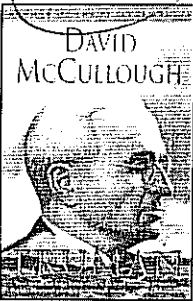


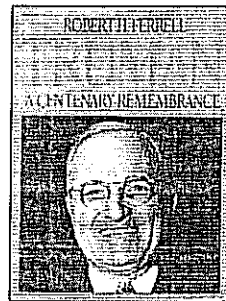
*Two Trumans: A critical comparative review of  
Truman, by David McCullough, and  
Truman: A Centenary Remembrance, by Robert H. Ferrell*

By '

Tuesday, Nov. 21  
U.S. History II  
Tue.-Thur. 8:30-9:45 a.m.



**TRUMAN**  
By David McCullough  
Simon & Schuster, 1992  
1107 pages



**TRUMAN:  
A CENTENARY  
REMEMBRANCE**  
By Robert H. Ferrell  
Viking Press, 1984  
256 pages

It is a common belief among Americans that pretty much anyone, if they work hard enough, or are at least lucky enough, can be President of the United States. Harry S. Truman is the proof that such a scenario can in fact become reality. He is the ultimate “everyman.” His beginnings were humble. He knew both success and failure. And where the lack of an education and refinement hampered him, he more than made up for it with determination and a solid work ethic.

So it is perhaps not surprising that two biographers, David McCullough, in *Truman*, and Robert Ferrell, in *Truman: A Centenary Remembrance*, both paint flattering portraits of a man who has been deemed an American folk hero.

But while both authors are generally supportive of Truman’s reputation and standing, there are clear differences in the approach each takes to the story of the man’s life. McCullough, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his book, uses meticulous research and a distinctive style to provide fresh and interesting detail in the course of creating an engrossing narrative of Truman’s life. He uses a wide variety of sources to give different perspectives to some familiar events. Ferrell, meanwhile, uses his book, which was published in 1984, to mark what would have been Truman’s 100th birthday, to simply summarize events with few voices other than the author’s.

A typical distinction between the two books is made in the course of McCullough’s

description of the moment it became apparent that Truman in 1948 had accomplished one of the greatest political upsets in history by winning re-election over challenger Gov. Tom Dewey – a feat thought impossible by professionals in both parties as well as a chorus of columnists and pollsters.

McCullough uses a letter written nearly a week later to show how Truman reacted. Jerome Walsh, a lawyer and friend of Truman's from Kansas City, Missouri, in the missive states that Truman "displayed neither tension nor elation," and describes how Truman merely grinned when someone pointed out a headline in the *Kansas City Star* which said "Election in Doubt." "The editor 'will change that in a few hours,'" Walsh says Truman remarked (McCullough 708).

The moment was not only a political triumph but a personal one as well. Truman had long been disparaged as the "accidental president," and prior to that as a simple product of machine politics. This was a stunning victory for Truman, as not only did he win back the office of the presidency, he also ushered in Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate. Most importantly, he earned respect.

McCullough uses his keen eye as a researcher and masterful ability as a storyteller to deliver details other biographers, including Ferrell, fail to weave into their story of Truman. When describing the night of Truman's re-election, where he carried 28 states with a total of 303 electoral votes, and defeated Dewey in the popular election by just over 2,100,000 votes, McCullough uses several anecdotes to demonstrate the extent to which hardly anyone considered the outcome remotely possible.

In one, he describes the actions of the Secret Service. The head of the agency, James J.

Maloney, McCullough writes, decided that Dewey was certain to win, and had five of his men take up position around an upper-floor suite where the candidate and his family and friends were relaxing before a planned victory speech. The speech, of course, never happened (McCullough 706).



President Harry S. Truman displays an erroneous newspaper headline following his upset victory over Gov. Thomas Dewey.

This bit of detail, while not important to the narrative of the story, is one way that McCullough distinguishes himself as such a wonderful biographer. By contrast, Ferrell in his book, spends very little time talking about the momentous election. Instead of delving into the utterly unexpected nature of Truman's victory, he instead discusses how Truman improved his speaking style during the campaign by using fewer hand gestures and gaining confidence in his ability to ad lib (Ferrell 193).

The dichotomy between the two authors should perhaps not be surprising. McCullough, a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, American historian and best-selling author, has earned a reputation as a master of the art of narrative history. His writing is distinguished by his attention to detail and ability to ferret out information about familiar topics that gives events additional color and depth.

Ferrell is also a successful historian and author, though far less well known than McCullough. He has been described as a "prolific diplomatic historian," and has written extensively about Truman. In addition to his biography, he edited Truman's autobiography as well as his private papers. Ferrell also edited a compilation of letters written by Truman to his wife both before and after their marriage. The book is titled *Dear Bess: The Letters of Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959* and was published in 1984 ("Ferrell"). McCullough quotes extensively

from this collection and it is frequently mentioned in the source notes for *Truman*.

While Ferrell's biography of Truman does not break any new ground or offer any innovative insights, it does provide a quality summary of the man's life. And there is plenty of interesting material to work with when considering the life of Truman.

His first experience with national politics came when he was elected as Missouri's representative to the Senate. The entire state was solidly Democratic at the time, and so the party bosses held enormous sway on the outcome of any election. Truman was the product of the corrupt political machine run by T. J. Pendergast, and he was often referred to as the "Senator from Pendergast." But despite people's estimation of him as being little more than a political hack, he gained national acclaim as the head of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program. There he led numerous investigations into spending abuses during World War II.

Though he was sometimes called the "accidental president" as he assumed office following the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945, both McCullough and Ferrell make it clear that the immensely popular Roosevelt's health was poor and that the Democratic Party and many voters were aware that the choice for vice president in 1944 was very well likely to become president.

Despite Ferrell's obvious closeness to Truman, he does offer some criticisms. He attributes the deep divisions that Americans felt over involvement in the Korean War to some early choices made by Truman, primarily a reluctance to ask Congress for a declaration of war. "Truman chose to regard the military response as a 'police action,'" and that description failed to give Americans enough feeling that the country was in danger and really at war," he writes

(Ferrell 210).

Ferrell is also critical when he delves into how the interpretation of one of Truman's most important decisions has been viewed and interpreted. On July 26, 1945, Truman gave the Air Force permission to use the first nuclear weapon on Hiroshima. The bomb was dropped less than two weeks later. Ferrell is judgmental of Truman's decision, perhaps a result of the fact that the book was written nearly four decades after the events in question. "In retrospect, it is clear that there should have been an explicit advance warning to the Japanese, followed by a demonstration of the awesome power of the new weapon," he writes (Ferrell 145).

Perhaps in Truman's defense, McCullough stresses that after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he ordered that no additional atomic bombs be used without his expressed permission, even though a third was available and ready. This was during a time when Japanese surrender was expected, but was not assured, and Japanese leaders were saying little. "The thought of wiping out another city was too horrible," he said," McCullough writes. "He hated the idea of killing 'all those kids'" (McCullough 460).

As another example of McCullough's meticulous research and selective inclusion of compelling detail, he describes a bit of the deliberations among the members of Japan's Supreme Council for the Direction of the War that took place in a bomb shelter on the morning that Nagasaki was bombed. The members of the council were initially split. Some argued fervently against surrender, and held out the notion that it was time to "lure" the Americans ashore. But when news of Nagasaki was delivered, the meeting was adjourned. In less than 24 hours, the Japanese government said it would accept some conditions of surrender, but wished for the Emperor to remain sovereign (McCullough 459).

In another example of using detail to illuminate a subject, McCullough examines Truman's childhood and discusses some of his favorite books. When he was only in the fourth grade, the young Truman was reading "everything I could get my hands on – histories and encyclopedias and everything else." For Truman's tenth birthday, in the spring of 1894, his mother presented him with a set of large illustrated volumes grandly titled "Great Men and Famous Women." "He would later count the moment as one of life's turning points," McCullough writes (McCullough 43).

Ferrell's stated purpose in writing his book was in part to restore some of the luster to Truman's reputation lost after he left office. At the end of his second term, the Korean war, cries of communism, and corruption had all damaged his reputation. He also retired from the presidency in the wake of a Republican triumph that was interpreted by his enemies as a mandate for change. "But with the passage of time, people have come to realize how effective a President he had been," Ferrell writes. "Today, Harry S. Truman has become a genuine folk hero" (Ferrell 8).

McCullough comes to a similar conclusion, and calls him a great American president. "Ambitious by nature, he was never torn by ambition, never tried to appear as something he was not," he writes. "He stood for common sense, common decency. He spoke the common tongue. As much as any president since Lincoln, he brought to the highest office the language and values of the common American people" (McCullough 991).

Though both Ferrell's and McCullough's biographies adequately present the essentials of Truman's life, *Truman*, by McCullough, demonstrates that the Pulitzer its author won for it was certainly deserved. The book provides a compelling background with which to learn about

the life and times of Truman. It is also a fun read and moves along quickly despite its more than 1,100-page length. The richness of the book is all the more noticable when compared with the relative flatness of Ferrell's biography. But Ferrell should not necessarily be faulted. He was a trusted family friend, and he obviously set out to create a flattering yet simple portrait of the former president. And that he did successfully.

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