



2008.04.02

Geoffrey Perret, *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007. Pp. x, 436. ISBN 978-0-374-53127-0.

Review by David J. Fitzpatrick, The University of Michigan and Washtenaw Community College (fitzd@umich.edu)

Two points need to be made at this review's outset. First, more than a few historians of the Ph.D. variety look down their noses at those in the profession who have not attained that lofty status. This reviewer is not one of them. Non-academic historians, particularly in the fields of political, diplomatic, and military history, have made substantial contributions to their fields. More importantly, these historians have often educated the public about important historical issues in ways academic historians either cannot or will not. Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, Rick Atkinson, Stanley Karnow, Bernard Fall, David McCullough, and Ken Burns come to mind in this regard, as does Geoffrey Perret, who, through his biography of Douglas MacArthur and works on the U.S. Army and Army Air Force in the Second World War,¹ has well served the public's never-ending interest in these subjects while telling well written and well researched stories.

Second, I jumped at the chance to review Perret's latest, *Commander in Chief*, when it was offered to me. Given Perret's past works I had expected a book of similar quality, one that tackled a critical historical issue with huge contemporary consequences. I anticipated a book that almost wrote itself: Truman's failure to seek congressional approval for American intervention in Korea, LBJ's use of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as a vehicle to escalate the conflict in Vietnam, and George W. Bush's unprecedented expansion of executive power in the aftermath of 9/11—all of these posed a threat to the future of our democratic republic. But I was sorely disappointed: *Commander in Chief* does not merit the attention of anyone seriously interested in its subject.

The book is flawed on many levels. Much in it belongs in the *National Enquirer* rather than a work of serious historical research. "Truman's wallet," we are told, "bulged with membership cards.... This was the wallet of a man who belonged" (28-9). What this has to do with Truman's expansion of presidential powers is not clear. But Perret goes well beyond such pointless observations, charging that Truman was under the influence of some unspecified drug when making many of his most important decisions. At one point he asks, "Was it Harry, or the pep pills?" (36-7, 137, 166) Perret's source for this revelation is an oral history in the Truman Library done by the president's physician, Dr. Sylvester Graham, in 1989, nearly 40 years after Truman had left office and only shortly before Graham died. These facts should have caused Perret to doubt the account's veracity, especially since Graham's previous oral history (1973) had not mentioned Truman's alleged drug use.

¹ *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life of Douglas MacArthur* (NY: Random House, 1996), *There's a War to be Won: The United States Army in World War II* (NY: Random House, 1991), and *Winged Victory: The Army Air Forces in World War II* (NY: Random House, 1993).

This, apparently, was enough to convince both Alonzo Hamby and David McCullough that Dr. Graham's account was unreliable,² but no rumor or innuendo is too suspect for *Commander in Chief*.

Such examples might fill a book (as, indeed, they do). Perret condescendingly quotes President Kennedy, "We strongly and unreservedly support the goal of a neutral and independent Lay-os," as if mispronunciation or a patrician Boston accent (or both) were, in and of themselves, worthy of disdain (87).³ MACV commander General Paul Harkins, according to Perret, "approached common sense as yet another enemy to be defeated" (194). Few historians give Harkins high marks, but none are so flippant in their condemnations, normally providing support for their assertions, where Perret offers none. Clark Clifford's account of a meeting in the Truman White House is labeled "so slanted it verged on crooked," an unsupported judgment that also shows Perret's annoying habit of mixing metaphors (102). Senator William Fulbright, Perret tells us, was "probably the most urbane racist of his generation" (231). This, almost certainly, was true, and it might have been germane in a book that addressed LBJ's efforts to push civil rights legislation through Congress. But it has nothing to do with the subject of this book and makes Perret appear little more than a second-rate gossip.

Perret often gets his facts wrong or misunderstands their meaning. In a brief "history" (roughly four pages) of presidential war powers before Truman, he states

Lincoln used his war powers to do many things that Congress would probably not have supported, such as instituting the draft. He demanded that the states implement conscription, but there was hardly a northern governor who believed that what he was doing was legal.

"Lincoln's slighting of Congress," Perret continues, "had a price"—the formation of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War (146). This account is wrong in numerous ways. First, it confuses the militia draft with the conscription of young men into volunteer regiments. Second, contrary to Perret's implication, both occurred with Congressional approval, the former under the Militia Act of 1862, the latter under the Conscription Act of 1863.⁴ Finally, Congress had created the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in late 1861, long before conscription became a vital issue. The committee's formation is best understood, not as a result of Lincoln's slighting of Congress, but as a response to the disaster at the Battle of Ball's Bluff and to rising congressional distrust of the commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George B. McClellan.⁵ The irony of these misstatements and misunderstandings is that much about Lincoln's expansion of presidential power *would* in fact fit into Perret's story. For example, Lincoln's suspension of *habeas corpus* would not only illuminate his use of his war-making powers, but also clarify a particularly

² Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1995), David McCullough, *Truman* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

³ Similarly, it is far less important whether President George W. Bush can properly pronounce "nuclear" than that he have a coherent military and foreign policy. Deriding his mispronunciations is properly fodder for late-night comedians, not serious historians.

⁴ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1988) 492-4, 600-1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 362-3.

divisive issue in our so-called “War on Terror.” Perret not only gets his history wrong, he overlooks events that still have relevance today.

Among many other examples of factual and/or interpretive error, a few illustrations will have to suffice. Perret claims that George Kennan’s 1946 Long Telegram concluded “Stalin’s military was not as daunting as it appeared,” yet nowhere does it or even imply that, least of all in the passage Perret quotes to support this assertion (59). Describing events preceding the Gulf of Tonkin incident, he incorrectly states that “an American force raided two small islands ... off the coast of North Vietnam” on the night of 31 July 1964, when, in fact, it was a South Vietnamese commando force (227).⁶ His flawed description of the infamous LBJ campaign commercial in which a little girl plucks a daisy suggests Perret either never saw it or is describing it solely from (imperfect) memory, neither of which is forgivable in the YouTube era (237). Perret both incorrectly defines the term “crossover point” and misattributes it to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (253) when its originator was General William C. Westmoreland.⁷ Such easily correctable mistakes call into doubt virtually all of Perret’s research.

The book’s errors might be due, in part, to a very eclectic collection of sources. Popular historians are often criticized for their over-reliance on secondary sources and lack of primary-source support for their arguments. Perret, in *Commander in Chief*, exemplifies the worst of both worlds. His primary sources are, overwhelmingly, oral histories, memoirs, and papers in the State Department’s multi-volume *Foreign Relations of the United States*.⁸ *FRUS* publishes important official documents as they become declassified, but seldom discloses the deliberations that led to particular decisions. Memoirs and oral histories, on which Perret relies especially heavily where Truman is concerned, can be untrustworthy (as would appear to be the case in the aforementioned Graham oral history) without supporting documentary evidence. Yet Perret unhesitatingly accepts almost any odd claim in such sources if it insults and denigrates important historical figures, whether or not it relates to his book’s subject.

These shortcomings might have been overcome had Perret consulted works by highly regarded historians who have worked extensively with multiple primary sources. Walter LaFeber, John Gaddis, Joseph Goulden, Burton Kaufman, David McCullough, Alonzo Hamby, Robert Dallek, and George Herring, among many others, have addressed at length the subjects of Perret’s book, but none appear to have been consulted in any meaningful way.⁹ Many secondary sources are cited only once (e.g., Stanley Karnow on Vietnam), oth-

⁶ See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (NY: Viking, 1983) 367, for an accurate account of events.

⁷ Among many other sources, see Robert D. Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1996) 255, for the term’s meaning and origins.

⁸ Perret’s account of Vietnam does cite numerous documents in the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries, but their use raises other questions. First, the account on Vietnam has whole chapters that lack such documentation. Why? Second, if he could undertake such research in support of his chapters on Vietnam, why did he not do so regarding the Truman presidency and its foreign policy? One must wonder whether Perret actually saw the documents he cites.

⁹ Perret only once cites (409n.11) one volume of Dallek’s two-volume biography of President Johnson, nor does he cite Dallek’s work on FDR’s foreign policy, his biography of JFK, or his work on Kissinger and Nixon, all of it highly regarded and highly relevant to Perret’s subject. Of course, relying on Dallek for anything regarding either JFK or LBJ might be to admit that Perret’s own work on Kennedy was not up to par.

ers are badly dated (e.g., H. Bradford Westerfield's *Foreign Policy and Party Politics*¹⁰), or, to be polite, rather eclectic (e.g., Athan Theoharis's *The Yalta Myths*¹¹). Perret's selective use of some sources, while ignoring other better researched and more recent works, suggests cherry-picking of his evidence to support predetermined conclusions.

Indeed, Perret virtually ignores factors that complicated the conduct of war and foreign policy. For example, he all but writes off the deleterious effect Joe McCarthy had on both.¹² "McCarthy's attacks on the State Department were scurrilous, but there was an integrity deficit there," Perret opines, "there" meaning Dean Acheson (145). In this rather amazing sleight of hand, he manages to elevate McCarthy *above* Acheson where integrity is concerned and, in so doing, minimizes the former's impact. It apparently never occurred to Perret that Acheson's alleged exaggerations might have been due, in large part, to increasing pressure from the political right, which was insisting that the Truman administration had been infiltrated by fellow travelers. It is a shortcoming that persists throughout *Commander in Chief*. For example, Perret repeatedly states that President Johnson felt handcuffed regarding his options in Vietnam in 1964 and 1965, and he goes to great lengths to argue that neither Eisenhower's commitment to South Vietnam, nor the SEATO treaty, nor anything JFK had done required LBJ to stay in Southeast Asia, much less to escalate the war there (221-5).¹³ Entirely missing from this discussion is the degree to which LBJ felt trapped by the ghost of Joe McCarthy.¹⁴ Whether Johnson *should* have felt trapped is debatable, but simply to ignore it as an important factor in LBJ's decision-making is unforgivable, and shows the very real limits of Perret's account and analysis.

I have not touched directly on Perret's argument, which concerns the threat that the expansion of presidential war power poses to the republic's future. There is good reason for this, as Perret, in a book of nearly 400 pages of text, seldom addresses the issue. He spends but four pages on the subject where Truman is concerned, and more than half of that is a flawed history of presidential war power before Truman.¹⁵ Nowhere does he begin to explain how Johnson's expansion of presidential war power (or, for that matter, Richard Nixon's, which far exceeded that of LBJ) posed a threat to the nation's future. And, where the presidency of George W. Bush is concerned, it is difficult to argue with his conclusions,

¹⁰ 1955; rpt. NY: Octagon, 1972.

¹¹ Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 1970.

¹² In fact, ever since the Truman presidency, the Democratic Party and the presidents who rose from its ranks have been fighting and losing to McCarthy's ghost.

¹³ Perret's contention that Johnson did not need to honor Eisenhower's commitment to Vietnam is spurious: "nations, including the United States, routinely break commitments made to other nations, so breaking this one would have been no big deal."

¹⁴ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1998) 278; George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: U Texas Pr, 1994) 130; Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (NY: Harper & Row, 1976). Nowhere in these sources is McCarthy specifically mentioned, but it is clear that Johnson feared a repeat of McCarthyism had he simply pulled out of Southeast Asia. John Kennedy had the same fears: George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 3rd ed. (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1996) 105.

¹⁵ The passage on Lincoln, cited above, is a good example of the unsound narrative in this section of the book.

but the story has been better told and far better researched by David Halberstam,¹⁶ Bob Woodward,¹⁷ Thomas Ricks,¹⁸ and by Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor.¹⁹

A serious book needs to be written about the expansion of presidential war-making power over the past half-century. This, unfortunately, is not that book.

¹⁶ David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (NY: Scribner, 2001).

¹⁷ Bob Woodward, *Bush At War* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002), and *Plan of Attack* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

¹⁸ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (NY: Penguin, 2006).

¹⁹ Michael R. Gordon & Bernard E. Trainor, *COBRA II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (NY: Pantheon, 2006).