Harry S. Truman left office in 1953 a failure, his administration seemingly undone by the Korean War, rumors of Communists in the government and corruption in several federal agencies. In his waning days in office, the public bestowed on him a dismal approval rating of 23 percent.

Since then it's only been up for him. These days, politicians of both parties assert on the campaign trail that they're latter-day Trumans, and voters, unbidden, surprise political reporters by telling them that they wish the 33rd president were still around, so they could vote for him.

Truman's canonization more or less became official in 1991, with the publication of David McCullough's adulatory "Truman," which went on to sell more than one million copies. It made the argument that Truman's odyssey from small-town Middle America to the world stage mirrored the country's own journey from parochialism to power.

Truman has done O.K. with academic historians, too. Since the late 1960's, he has regularly popped up somewhere between Nos. 5 and 10 on those periodic presidential-reputation surveys of historians. He's been the subject of a number of major biographies and he plays a major role in the voluminous literature that pits cold war "traditionalists," who see him as staunchly standing up to an expansive Soviet Union, against the "revisionists," who believe Truman helped implement overly militaristic, confrontational policies.

The flood of Truman books continues apace. This year alone has seen "The Conquerors," by the historian-cum-TV-pundit Michael Beschloss, about Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman and the end of World War II, and a new collection of the correspondence of Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt. But no recent book has stirred up the world of Truman devotees and cold war scholars quite like Arnold A. Offner's "Another Such Peace: President Truman and the Cold War: 1945-1953," published by Stanford University Press.

Professor Offner, of Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, who labored nearly 20 years on the book, is an unapologetic revisionist. For instance, he argues that the Marshall Plan,
the hugely ambitious attempt to reconstruct Western Europe, actually caused the Soviet Union to clamp down on Eastern Europe — and that without it, Stalin might have granted those states a degree of autonomy. In the case of the Korean War, he thinks the United States provoked a reluctant China to enter the conflict by recklessly chasing the North Korean Army right up against the Chinese border.

All that is more or less par for the revisionist course — although still controversial. What's more striking is Professor Offner's relentlessly dim view of Truman as a man. He pins failed cold war policies on what he sees as Truman's flawed character.

He starts with the same details as the hagiographers: small-town life in Independence, Mo.; the thick glasses Harry S. wore as a child; the failed efforts, in his 30's, to get a haberdashery up and running. But rather than play up the Horatio Alger echoes, Mr. Offner stresses the inbred quality of small-town life. He writes that in Independence, Truman learned to distrust outsiders, adopted a rigidly black and white view of the world, and absorbed the fundamentalist belief that punishment must invariably follow transgression.

"The Truman I found in the documents — in his diaries, in records of his cabinet meetings — was not the Truman that was being depicted" in the laudatory biographies, Mr. Offner said in an interview.

Discussions of the book have resurrected timeworn divisions in the field of cold war history. "He didn't leave a hero," says Walter LaFeber, a historian at Cornell. "He made foreign policy decisions that cost a lot of lives and shaped a very controversial cold war. That's what Offner explains and I think it's all to the good."

But in a review posted on Thursday on H-Diplo, an e-mail discussion group for diplomatic historians, Eduard Mark, a historian with the United States Air Force, is scathing. "Another Such Victory," he writes, "is a book for aging revisionists who wish it were still 1975 and that they still had honest illusions (rather than today's desperate self-deceptions)" — the chief self-deception being, in Mr. Mark's view, Professor Offner's contention that Stalin had few if any international ambitions for Communism.

What, however, of Mr. Offner's view of Truman, more personally? For although Mr. Offner casts himself as the anti-McCullough, whittling down to size a persona built up by the best-selling "Truman," some cold war scholars say he has fallen into the same trap as his rival. Both, in their own way, believe that Truman's personal biography was determinative of the course American foreign policy took, a variant of the great-man theory of history. But do the personal strengths and foibles of leaders map so neatly onto world-historical developments?
Carolyn Eisenberg, a historian at Hofstra University, largely shares Mr. Offner's dismissive view of Truman. From her reading of transcripts of White House meetings, she says: "What's very striking about Truman is that very often he just doesn't know what's going on. He's very disconnected for much of the time. He just has no understanding of the policies being made in his name."

But it's for precisely that reason, she thinks, that Truman cannot be held personally responsible for every twist and turn of American cold-war policies. Truman's limitations, she thinks, meant that authority devolved onto advisers like George C. Marshall, Dean Acheson, James F. Byrnes and, in general, the American foreign-policy elite.

Mr. Mark of the Air Force, whose view of the cold war is far more traditional than Professor Eisenberg's, makes a similar point in his review: "While the president's personal style may have affected events on the margin, Professor Offner gives us no cause for supposing that policy would have been significantly different had another man occupied the Oval Office from 1945 to 1953.

Maybe that's the biography that is waiting to be written: "Truman: It Doesn't Matter."