Culture
Book Reviews



University of Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy, foreground, poses for a photo with four players at football practice on Aug. 31, 1949, in South Bend, Ind. (AP/Harry L. Hall, File)



by Jay Sorgi

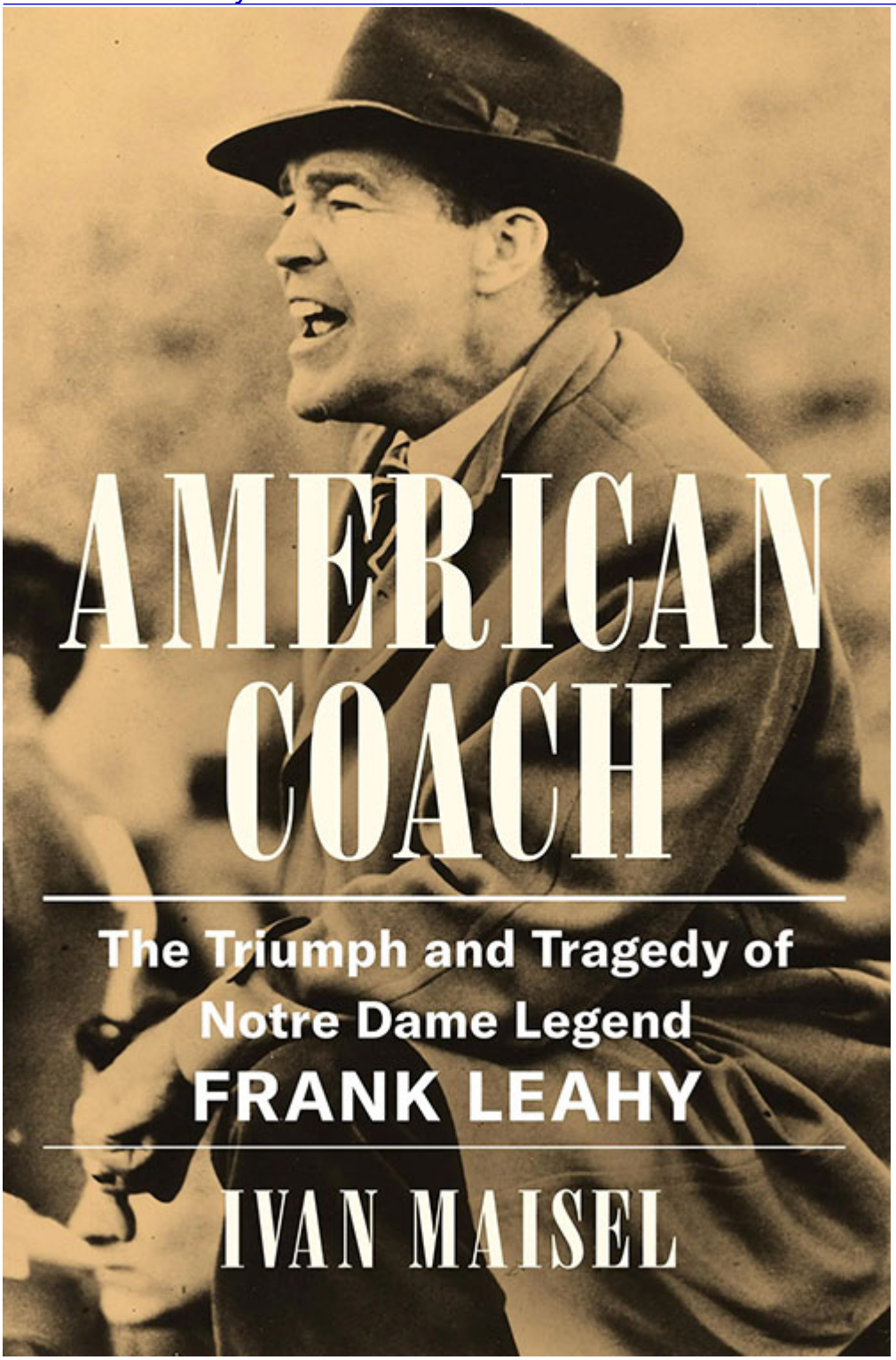
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American Coach: The Triumph and Tragedy of Notre Dame Legend Frank Leahy
Ivan Maisel
400 pages; Grand Central Publishing
$30.00

He embodied an archetype: the hard-working, faithful Irish Catholic descendant of immigrants who reached the best of his own ability. And he did it on perhaps the greatest stage an American Catholic could in his time.

But Frank Leahy paid a price for marching Notre Dame to victory on the gridiron.

In the new book *American Coach: The Triumph and Tragedy of Notre Dame Legend Frank Leahy*, longtime college football writer Ivan Maisel traces Leahy's resume of success as a football coach who achieved more national championships and unbeaten seasons in his years at the University of Notre Dame than even his legendary mentor, Knute Rockne, who died in a plane crash in 1931.

But the way Leahy accomplished it may have led to him becoming the most forgotten legendary coach in the history of college football, all while making his family, his legacy and himself pay an overexacting cost for success, the workaholic's unhealthy plight.

Maisel offers a critical but empathetic lens in *American Coach*, taking the reader into Leahy's childhood on the plains of Nebraska and South Dakota, where the fire to prove classmates wrong and commitments made to his siblings created an early vow for future success — and the willingness to work harder than anyone else for it.

Maisel's storytelling weaves the reader through Leahy's early days at Boston College in 1939-40, mentoring Vince Lombardi and John Wooden, nearly turning Jack Kerouac into a Boston College Eagle with pro aspirations instead of a writer, and turning the Jesuit school into an undefeated national powerhouse.

All before Notre Dame came calling in 1941.

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Maisel takes great care in noting when the pathways of reality and legend diverge, or when the decades have rendered irrefutable evidence unavailable. That includes the controversial pathway Leahy took in leaving Boston College for the Golden Dome, and resigning from the Fighting Irish — sort of.

In between, *American Coach* regales the reader with countless stories of how Leahy tirelessly — well, perhaps not tirelessly, as his insomnia proved — spent every

possible waking hour inside a dorm room away from his family, strategizing game plans and motivational tactics for the young men who came to South Bend, Indiana.

While other coaches recruited, Leahy selected from the best of the best — sometimes cutting eventual Pro Football Hall of Famers — then funneled into them his childhood truism that working harder was the only way to success. His players joked that spring practice should begin in December and end in August.

While other coaches deeply engaged in the necessity of publicity and strong relationships with colleagues and the press, the introverted Leahy stayed single-minded, often to his detriment.

Except on the football field, which was the bottom line that mattered.

Maisel shows how, 107 times between Boston College and Notre Dame, the man who hated to lose made his teams winners on the field. The coach who served in the Navy mid-career, endured ongoing exhaustion, and was once hospitalized for pancreatitis in the middle of a football game ran a 39-game unbeaten streak and six undefeated seasons.



In the new book *American Coach: The Triumph and Tragedy of Notre Dame Legend*, Frank Leahy, longtime college football writer Ivan Maisel traces Leahy's resume of success as a coach — and the personal price he paid for it. (Wikimedia Commons)

The book documents Leahy's willingness to occasionally adjust his often-dictatorial methods, particularly when it came to coaching veterans who had endured the horrors of war, as well as his evolution in a willingness to stand up for his few Black players over the years.

Maisel's give-and-take of victory and price paid, of obsession that obscured relationship, finds a fascinating theater in one of those "Game of the Century" college football events that rarely lives up to the billing, but did in 1946 when two teams that symbolized God and country, Notre Dame and Army, engaged in the football equivalent of trench warfare at New York's Yankee Stadium — with the entire nation watching and listening. Maisel's recounting of Leahy's long, emotional struggle inside the Yankee Stadium locker room after the grudge match reveals the kind of obsessive and unbalanced life that would exact a severe cost.

Leahy's Fighting Irish embodied the most visible sign of Catholic success at a time of rapid growth among the church in America. But as Maisel poignantly points out, his health paid for it. His wife's mental state paid for it. His relationship with his eight children paid for it. As leadership at Notre Dame focused on making its academics as elite as its football program, Leahy's entire coaching career paid for it. In the end, he paid the ultimate physical price for it.

Through all this, *American Coach* balances Leahy's personal struggles with an irrefutable, parable-packed resume of success. Maisel's evidence showcases how the court of college football public opinion should give Leahy a far better legacy, and a place alongside Rockne, Bear Bryant and Nick Saban on the Mount Rushmore of college football coaches.

Even if Leahy wasn't a man of indestructible stone.