

12-1-1979

Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932 – 1945 By Robert Dallek

Thomas G. Patterson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/iclr>

 Part of the [Comparative and Foreign Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thomas G. Patterson, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932 – 1945* By Robert Dallek , 3 B.C. Int'l & Comp. L. Rev. 276 (1979),
<http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/iclr/vol3/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ Boston College Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Boston College International and Comparative Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Boston College Law School. For more information, please contact nick.szydowski@bc.edu.

THOMAS G. PATERSON*

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1932-1945. BY ROBERT DALLEK. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 657 pp.

In so many ways Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945) wanted to be like his famous older cousin, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919). As Robert Dallek notes in the opening pages of his lengthy narrative, both men graduated from Harvard University, sat in the New York State legislature, served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, ran as a vice-presidential candidate, and ultimately reached the pinnacle of the Presidency itself. Although they were members of different political parties — Franklin was a Democrat and Theodore a Republican — they shared similar ideologies. Both Roosevelts were aristocrats who felt an obligation toward people less fortunate than themselves; both were cosmopolitan leaders, well-travelled, full of energy and ambition. Like his cousin, the young Franklin believed that the United States must assume leadership in the world and build a large navy to insure American security and prosperity. Before Theodore's death in 1919, both men were expansionists and interventionists who held the arrogant belief that Americans knew what was best for other societies. "Sooner or later . . . the United States must go down there and clean up the Mexican political mess," FDR remarked in 1914.¹

However, in the 1920s and 1930s, FDR sounded less and less like Theodore. Always alert to the temper of the times and always the ambitious politician who seldom strayed too far from the domain circumscribed by "public opinion," Dallek notes that FDR talked less about military preparedness and more about disarmament at a time when Americans were disillusioned with the experience of World War I. Responsive to growing criticism of United States military intrusions into Latin American, he launched the "Good Neighbor Policy." In the 1930s, when Europe and Asia descended into diplomatic crises and wars, FDR expressed the prevalent American "isolationist" attitude that the United States should not be drawn into foreign squabbles and perhaps another world war. He signed the Neutrality Acts as barriers to American involvement. Dallek argues that FDR adhered to isolationist slogans only to satiate public opinion and to win votes and that, in fact, FDR was still an internationalist, an interventionist, and an advocate of an ac-

* Thomas G. Patterson, Professor of History at the University of Connecticut, is the author of *ON EVERY FRONT: THE MAKING OF THE COLD WAR* (1979), *SOVIET-AMERICAN CONFRONTATION* (1973), and *AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: A HISTORY* (1977), and editor of *COLD WAR CRITICS* (1971) and *AMERICAN IMPERIALISM AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM* (1973).

1. R. DALLEK, *FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY 1932-1945* 8 (1979) [hereinafter cited as DALLEK].

tivist foreign policy. Dallek portrays FDR in the late 1930s as removing his isolationist mask to call for repeal of the Neutrality Acts and for providing aid to the beleaguered British and French. During the war years, the President conducted a foreign policy that led to a victory against totalitarianism.

Scholars who have attempted to study FDR have been hindered by the fact that the President left no diary. They point out that he often neglected to make official memoranda of conversations after important meetings with foreign diplomats. Moreover, he frequently failed to inform the Department of State of his decisions. His letters were often breezy and casual, leaving few traces of his inner thoughts. Historians who pursue a study of FDR must, by necessity, rely upon recollections and diaries by associates such as Harry Hopkins, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., and Rexford G. Tugwell. FDR's character is elusive because dissembling was one of his major traits. He was ingratiating, witty and evasive, spinning stories when he did not wish to discuss a serious matter. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson once grew impatient with the President's "confounded happy-go-luckiness."² His contemporaries wondered where FDR really stood on certain issues, and scholars today confront the same question.

There is also the problem of FDR's disorganized decision-making procedures. He conducted a personal diplomacy that often left out the State Department. FDR appointed a close friend (Sumner Welles) as Under-Secretary of State, and a Tennessee politician (Cordell Hull) as Secretary of State, to keep the State Department off-balance and internally divided, thereby insuring that he was the court of last resorts. He listened to Welles and ignored Hull, causing the latter to grumble that he was "tired of being relied upon in public and ignored in private."³ FDR signed agreements with foreign leaders without including precise technical language, thereby inviting differing interpretations of vague words. "Roosevelt never was much of a stickler for language," recalled Ambassador W. Averell Harriman.⁴ All in all, historians face major obstacles in sketching a complete and convincing portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

It was not surprising that histories of FDR's diplomacy have varied greatly. In his crisp little volume, *Roosevelt and World War II*,⁵ Robert A. Divine sees FDR as a committed isolationist who deeply believed that the United States should avoid war and insulate itself from Europe's broils. Arnold Offner, in *American Appeasement*,⁶ thinks the President was an appeaser—a word that Dallek does not use. Dallek comes closest to the thesis of James MacGregor

2. D. YERGIN, *SHATTERED PEACE* 43 (1977).

3. C. THORNE, *ALLIES OF A KIND* 114 (1978) [hereinafter cited as THORNE].

4. W. A. HARRIMAN AND E. ABEL, *SPECIAL ENVOY* 399 (1975).

5. R. DEVINE, *ROOSEVELT AND WORLD WAR II* (1969).

6. A. OFFNER, *AMERICAN APPEASEMENT* (1969).

Burns, who, in *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*,⁷ depicts Roosevelt as a politician who tailored his foreign policy to his own personal political needs. Dallek writes that FDR's isolationism was a facade used to garner votes for his domestic New Deal program and re-election. While Divine discusses the famous 1936 Chautaugua speech, in which FDR said he hated war, as a true reflection of FDR's isolationism, Dallek writes that the address was a political gesture.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945 is a comprehensive narrative, spiced with quotations from rich archival sources. The story moves chronologically through the many issues and crises of international relations that FDR faced. There is little analysis; the book is descriptive rather than analytical. The tone is defensive. When Dallek concedes criticisms to FDR's detractors, he pulls back from judgment himself, pointing out that the times were troubled and that domestic constraints handcuffed the President. Dallek points out that FDR deliberately deceived the American people,⁸ used the FBI to snoop on his political critics, neglected to develop a viable plan to save the European Jews, and was so disorganized that he was unable to launch systematic policies. Yet responsibility is usually not pinned on FDR. Dallek absolves FDR by saying that he had no control over events such as the expansionism of Russia, the Chinese civil war, and the rebellions in the colonial world, all of which unhinged his hopes for a stable postwar world. True as this is, Dallek is remiss in not emphasizing that FDR had the arrogance to think he could control them and, in fact, tried to in ways that ultimately undermined the national interest or led to subsequent crises. In 1944, journalists Jonathan Daniels talked with Roosevelt and recorded this comment: "All throughout his conversation he indicated an almost boyish interest in geography, and I got the strange impression that in planning the future of the world he was like a boy playing trains with the world, setting up cities, planning free towns."⁹

Dallek places too much emphasis on 'public opinion' and politics. FDR was a supreme politician: he read the Gallup polls and he was alert to the power of Congress in matters of foreign policy. However, Dallek's treatment of this theme is confusing. He was the President bowing to public opinion in some instances (Neutrality Acts) and forthrightly rejecting the opinion expressed in other circumstances (cutting off war-related goods to Japan). Dallek too frequently attributes FDR's behavior to deference to an isolationist sentiment without providing direct evidence of such influence. If FDR believed as profoundly as Dallek says he did in an activist, interventionist foreign policy before the late 1930s, why did he not try to persuade opinion to follow his lead? After all, persuasion was FDR's forte. I came away from the book uncon-

7. J. M. BURNS, *ROOSEVELT: THE LION AND THE FOX* (1956).

8. E.g., the Greer incident.

9. J. DANIELS, *WHITE HOUSE WITNESS* 22, 12 (1975).

vinced that FDR was secretly an interventionist. Rather, he was a mixture of an expedient politician, and an isolationist who like many Americans in the 1930s was groping for a foreign policy that fit times of aggression, totalitarianism, and war. FDR was far more confused and uncertain than Dallek suggests.

In his treatment of World War II diplomacy, Dallek highlights the following: Churchill's influence over FDR; FDR's utter dislike of Charles DeGaulle; and Roosevelt's attempts to elevate Chiang Kai-shek's China to a great power status as an American ally. Dallek also emphasized the President's decision to grab Pacific inlands as future American bases, his search for accommodation with Russia and his growing suspicion of Soviet intentions. Dallek depicts Roosevelt as a hard-headed diplomat who sought to expand American interests and who understood the machinations of global politics. The author notes that FDR saw the atomic bomb as a potential diplomatic weapon to pry concessions from Moscow. However, he neglects to mention that FDR saw foreign aid, especially a large postwar loan that Russia requested, as another lever for persuading the Russians to accept American plans for the postwar world. Dallek's conclusion that "had he lived, Roosevelt would probably moved more quickly than Truman to confront the Russians"¹⁰ is dubious. FDR had much at stake in seeing his schemes for cooperation come to fruition. His style, and his willingness to understand Russian fears and goals, stood in stark contrast to Truman's "give-em-hell" style and impatience. It is doubtful that FDR would have moved more quickly than Truman to abandon the Yalta agreements that he had worked so hard to craft. In light of considerable recent scholarship, it appears that the United States could have taken steps to reduce postwar tension especially since the Cold War cannot be attributed solely to the suspicions of the Russians.¹¹

The weakest parts of Dallek's study concern the "Third World," where, in the 1930s and 1940s, the beginnings of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist stirrings were evident. For example, Dallek accepts FDR's own assessment that the new emphasis on the Good Neighbor Policy was a major departure in American foreign policy. Dallek's analysis is superficial. David Green's *Containment of Latin America*,¹² has demonstrated that the Good Neighbor Policy was more a change in tactics to insure continued United States hegemony in Latin America than a giving up of that hegemony. The Good Neighbor Policy did not lead to the excellent relations that Dallek finds. When Dallek discusses Under-Secretary of State Welles' subversive activities against the revolutionary government of Grau San Martin in Cuba in 1933-1934, he fails to point out how angry Cubans were with United States interventionism. Dallek

10. DALLEK, *supra* note 1 at 534.

11. See T. PATTERSON, *ON EVERY FRONT* (1979) for a synthesis of recent works on the issue.

12. D. GREEN, *CONTAINMENT OF LATIN AMERICA* (1971).

cites a 1936 treaty with Panama as another triumph of the new policy. This treaty¹³ increased the United States annuity payment to Panama for use of the Canal and gave Panama certain rights of nationhood that the American presence previously had held back. But Dallek's research and understanding of this treaty fall short. In his recent study, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*,¹⁴ Walter LaFeber notes that the increased annuity was 'illusory' because FDR had devalued the dollar. Moreover, the United States Senate did not ratify the treaty for three years, arousing Panama's bitterness month by month. LeFeber concludes: "As the two nations prepared for world war, Panamanians were embittered that they had received less than had been promised in 1936."¹⁵ Indeed, the 1936 treaty was used to justify a United States seizure of more Panamanian territory in 1940, another fact that Dallek fails to mention in his flawed treatment of the Good Neighbor Policy.

There are also shortcomings in Dallek's discussion of FDR's retreat from anti-colonial ideas. FDR was highly critical of the French record in Indochina. Early in the war, he repeatedly argued that the French should not be permitted to return and that Indochina should enjoy some degree of autonomy — perhaps under a trusteeship governed by the United Nations Organization. But in the last months before his death, FDR acquiesced in the restoration of French colonial rule in Indochina. As Dallek correctly emphasizes, FDR did not want to anger the French, whose cooperation he sought in the postwar peace in Europe, and he could not rely on the weak Chinese to take on management duties in Indochina. Like many Americans, FDR was intolerant of native peoples who wished to chart their own destiny: he believed that colonial peoples were not ready for self-government and was condescending toward darker-skinned peoples. FDR stated that colonial peoples were "backward" and needed to be educated by others.¹⁶ FDR was patronizing, if not racist, toward Third World Nations. He mocked Burmese leaders in a 1942 letter to Churchill: "I never liked the Burmese and you people must have had a terrible time with them the last fifty years. Thank the Lord you have He-Saw, We-Saw, You-Saw under lock and key."¹⁷ It was FDR who said that the Japanese were aggressive because their skulls were less developed than those of Caucasians, the Vietnamese were "of small stature . . . and not warlike,"¹⁸ and the Puerto Rican birthrate might be curbed by mass sterilization.¹⁹ One wonders, in considering statements like these, conspicuously missing in Dallek's work, just how anti-colonialist FDR was.

13. Treaty with Panama on Friendship and Cooperation, United States - Panama, Mar. 2, 1936, 53 Stat. 1807, T.S. No. 945.

14. W. LAFEVER, *THE PANAMA CANAL: THE CRISIS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE* (1978).

15. *Id.* at 87-88.

16. THORNE, *supra* note 3, at 6.

17. *Id.* at 8.

18. *Id.* at 159.

19. *Id.* at 457.