

From Munich to Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt's America and the Origins of the Second World War

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By David Reynolds. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001. 209 pages.

Reviewed by Michael Warner

Who started the Cold War—the United States or the Soviet Union? Was it Truman's provincial anti-communism or Stalin's ruthless tyranny? Were the vast national security policies and institutions that Washington built to fight the Cold War wise precautions or wasteful threats to American liberty? David Reynolds probably thinks these are the wrong questions. His new book *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*

convincingly explains that it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt—before Pearl Harbor—who forged the grand strategy that guided US policies through the Cold War, and that still guides American decisionmakers in our new century.

Reynolds' book is not a sustained historical investigation with the standard apparatus of long footnotes and copious primary source citations. *From Munich to Pearl Harbor* is actually an extended essay, but calling it such

should in no way belittle it or diminish its impact on professional scholarship. Reynolds, a Fellow of Christ College, Cambridge, and author of several books on Anglo-American relations and World War II, is an experienced scholar who is working here in a genre with a distinguished past (one thinks of Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal meditation on the significance of the frontier in America's development as another example). In any event, Reynolds' clear prose and deft examples should broaden the appeal of his thesis beyond the confines of academia.

From Munich to Pearl Harbor explains how President Roosevelt watched and responded while the world order was turned on its ear during the three years between Hitler's bloodless conquest of Czechoslovakia and the Japanese attack on Hawaii. Munich alerted FDR to the danger of another European war and—just as important in his strategic thinking—to the growing capability of bombers to cross the oceans that had long protected America. Cautiously but publicly, Roosevelt applied himself to the tasks of educating citizens to the new peril and rewriting laws and policies to prepare for another crisis.

The problem for FDR in doing so was that Americans held vivid memories of the last global crisis—the World War that sucked in the United States in 1917. The lessons of that war were misapplied in the late 1930s, resulting in neutrality laws that hobbled our ability to aid Germany's foes, even after Hitler and Stalin signed their August 1939 non-aggression pact and carved up Poland between them, thereby bringing the whole expanse between the Rhine and the Bering Sea under the sway of militant tyranny.

Americans desperately wanted to remain aloof "this time," feebly calling for peace until the German onslaught of May 1940. In a matter of weeks the French Army collapsed, the British were routed, Italy threw its lot with Germany, and Hitler controlled Western Europe from the Arctic Circle to the Pyrenees. What would happen next? Would the British sue for peace? Would Spain and Japan join the Axis? Would Hitler gobble up Gibraltar, Suez, and French West Africa, as it seemed he could do with a few quick bites?

Suddenly America faced the very real possibility that the entire eastern shore of the Atlantic could soon be in hostile hands, with a war looming in the Pacific and the Royal Navy either sunk or surrendered to Hitler. Official Washington neared a state of panic, and public opinion began to awaken to the danger. What to do about it, however, was hardly clear.

To many Americans, including most of the military (and future presidents John F. Kennedy and Gerald Ford), the answer lay in "Hemispheric Defense," a re-armament designed to defend the western Atlantic and Latin America from German encroachment. Roosevelt thought that strategy insufficient. With the growing capabilities of airpower, Hitler's manifest duplicity, and the looming threat from Japan (which leagued itself with Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact in September 1940), Hemispheric Defense could only delay the inevitable war with the Axis powers, while giving them breathing space to consolidate their conquests and allowing them to initiate the final conflict with America at a time of their choosing.

Reynolds doubts the actual historical likelihood of such a nightmare scenario, claiming that the Tripartite Pact's secret annexes made it a publicity stunt rather than a real alliance (which is why the Germans and Japanese never concerted their offensives). Nevertheless, he claims that Roosevelt could not know about the hollowness of the Pact, and he credits FDR's perception of the danger to the United States. Roosevelt, realizing that Congress had no stomach for a formal declaration of war short of some serious German provocation, became convinced that the best hope for America and the world lay in a forward defense of our interests through all possible assistance to Britain.

Many prominent Americans agreed and argued such a case in public, but the confusion of the moment and the understandable yearning for peace greatly complicated the national debate. Taking his chances, and cleverly describing his moves as Hemispheric Defense, FDR took a series of emergency measures beginning in the summer of 1940. He formed what was essentially a war cabinet, tapping prominent Republicans Henry Stimson and Frank Knox to run the War and Navy Departments. He unilaterally gave 50 old destroyers to a Royal Navy desperately short of convoy escorts, and got Congress to reinstate the draft and approve Lend Lease when London was literally down to the last of its monetary reserves. He ran for an unprecedented third term as President, citing the world crisis in doing so. He approved the creation of America's first peacetime intelligence agency—appointing William J. Donovan as Coordinator of Information—and initiated research into the possibility of building atomic explosives. Reynolds could have added to this list the extraordinary Anglo-American sharing of technological, scientific, and intelligence secrets that began in 1940. And he might have mentioned that, under Roosevelt and the looming threat of global war, the Army Air Force that same year designed a giant bomber to fly from the States to targets in Europe.

These steps collectively amounted to an historic shift in America's conception of its place in the world. FDR believed that our real front line was not the Atlantic but the English Channel; that if we missed our chance to fight in Europe, we might very well have to fight in our own territorial waters, or turn America into an armed camp and lose our traditions of freedom and self-governance in so doing. In essence, Roosevelt was agreeing with notions of the growing international relations speciality called "geopolitics," the disciples of which referred to the Eurasian landmass as "the World Island" and quoted Yale professor Nicholas Spykman's dictum that "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world."¹

On the political front, FDR tried with some success to convince Americans that England with its Empire was worth saving for reasons over and above naked national self-interest. When Hitler attacked Russia in June 1941, Roosevelt even tried, with less enthusiasm, to paint Russia as a proto-democracy. To make these rhetorical feats more plausible, in August 1941 FDR cajoled Churchill into jointly issuing the Atlantic Charter, which rhetorically committed Britain and the United States to "the final destruction of Nazi tyranny," and the "establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security" once peace was restored. The Prime Minister would have preferred an American declaration of war to such a statement of common "war aims" by an America that was still technically neutral, but London needed Washington's backing and quietly applauded FDR's efforts—through the Charter and more pointedly by escorting convoys in the Atlantic—to provoke a *casus belli* from Hitler.

Roosevelt soon got a war, but it was not the one he wanted. Reynolds contends that an unimaginative State Department and FDR's denunciations of tyranny—which he felt obliged to apply to Asia as well as Europe—isolated Japan (then mired in a hopeless effort to subdue China) and fostered paranoia in Tokyo's militaristic and isolated elites. The Japanese lashed out in what they considered self-defense, instantly uniting America in the face of a common threat and precipitating Hitler's own declaration of war a few days after Pearl Harbor.

Reynolds' subtitle—*Roosevelt's America and the Origins of the Second World War*—would seem to be a misnomer. After all, FDR did not start World War II, and indeed the conflict was more than two years old when America finally entered in December 1941. But this is one of the keys to Reynolds' project. He convincingly argues that it was by no means clear to

Americans or anyone else in 1940, or even 1941, that the European war, bad as it was, would become a second global conflagration. FDR was one of the first to call the conflict the "Second World War" (he used the phrase as early as March 1941). By his actions, argues Reynolds, FDR helped to make it one—and also made it winnable for the West, which it might not otherwise have been: "American perceptions of a cohesive totalitarian plot helped ease the United States into world war. But the reality of Axis divergence helped ensure eventual Allied victory."²

Why should intelligence professionals care about such seemingly distant events? Because those events reverberate through our troubled present and our uncertain future. Although Reynolds stops his narrative at the close of 1941, his lengthy concluding chapter explains how the *ad hoc* measures that Roosevelt undertook in 1940 and 1941 coalesced into America's grand strategy for the Cold War. With Stalin's armies in Germany and his operatives subverting a war-ruined Western Europe in 1947, and with Mao on the march in China, Americans once again faced the possibility of armed tyranny controlling the far shores of the Atlantic and the Pacific. FDR's strategy to defend the Rimland was implemented by President Harry Truman. Indeed, among the steps that Truman took in the late 1940s was deploying that giant bomber—the B-36—that the Army Air Force had sketched in 1940, only now it had jet engines and carried the atomic bombs that FDR, also in 1940, had ordered developed. Thanks in part to the credibility of such deterrence, this time there was no third world war, but instead a Cold War that stretched across five decades.

Every succeeding president, Republican and Democrat alike, has followed in Truman's—make that Roosevelt's—footsteps. The outlines of this modern American grand strategy have been preserved even by Presidents Clinton and Bush. If you doubt the latter, consult the introductory chapters of Secretary Rumsfeld's 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (just a few clicks away on the internet). We are still defending the Rimland; that is why the QDR speaks so insistently (and in geographic terms almost exclusively) about "Europe, Northeast Asia, the East Asian littoral, and the Middle East/Southwest Asia." The United States is not about to tolerate the efforts of a hegemonic and aggressive power to dominate any of those areas, whether the hegemon speaks Russian, Chinese, or Arabic. This is still the default setting for US foreign policy.

What is the job of intelligence in this grand strategy? It is two-fold. First, it helps to implement the strategy: To paraphrase the QDR, it assures our allies, monitors potential threats, deters aggressors, and defeats our foes.

The second, but perhaps prior function of intelligence is to validate the strategy's premises. Is it still true, for instance, that only nation-states can marshal the will and the resources to credibly threaten America? Is it still true, to continue this thought, that the only nation-states that might someday dare to do so are large and hegemonic Eurasian powers? Are there sources and methods that can allow us to reduce the threat of weapons of mass destruction without turning our society into the "armed camp" that President Roosevelt dreaded in 1940?

The answers to some of these questions have become clearer since 11 September 2001. Nonetheless, it may take years before we can judge whether Franklin Roosevelt's grand strategy befits the 21st Century as well as the 20th. For those starting out in the business of intelligence, there can be few more important and interesting questions upon which to launch a career.

Footnotes:

¹ See the definition of "geopolitics" in Jay M. Shafritz, Phil Williams, and Ronald S. Calinger, *The Dictionary of 20th Century World Politics* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1993).

² Reynolds, p. 170.

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