



## *A Blueprint for War: FDR and the Hundred Days That Mobilized America*

by Susan Dunn.

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The twenty-seven months between the outbreak of World War II and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor were critical in the history of American diplomacy and the US role in the world. Specifically, Americans moved from a desire for isolation to the embrace of an expansive role in international affairs. In *A Blueprint for War*,<sup>1</sup> historian Susan Dunn (Williams College) continues her analysis of the nature of President Franklin Roosevelt's leadership.<sup>2</sup> She focuses here on what she calls FDR's "third hundred days," which saw the passage of Lend-Lease, the formulation of future military priorities, and the mobilization of the US economy for war. All this against the background of the Blitz, as "Britain reeled every night under the Luftwaffe's rain of bombs" (12), including the aerial attack on Plymouth on (US) Thanksgiving Day<sup>3</sup> (30). In the foreground, Americans were "still asleep" concerning international dangers (38), a lassitude FDR himself had encouraged during his 1940 presidential campaign when he "made his obeisances to the God of No Foreign War" (9). Furthermore, he was suffering repeated bouts of colds, flu, and general fatigue (1, 19, 164), and only gradually became "fully engaged in the urgency of this global crisis" (12).

Dunn examines the reactions of FDR and his administration to the world situation between November 1940 and March 1941. A crucial problem was the lack of military preparedness. The United States had virtually disarmed after the First World War; as the Second began, its army ranked only *seventeenth* in the world in size and even lower in effectiveness (15). The advent of conscription in fall 1940 enlarged the force, but Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall reported that, so far as weapons were concerned, the army was "nearly down to the bottom of the can" (14). Nor was the US Navy "yet prepared for battles on the seas" (32).

FDR's trusted civilian heads of the War and Navy departments (Henry Stimson and William Knox, respectively) and commanders of the armed services (General Marshall and Adm. Harold Stark) pressed him for action. Stark spoke for all when he complained that "the president was confronting the crisis erratically, with no clear strategy or even an effective structure of decision making" (33). He took it upon himself to write a long paper listing four options for the employment of American forces in wartime. His option "D" ("Plan Dog," as it came to be known) proposed a concentration on Europe on the assumption that "the continued existence of Britain and its global empire ... would best ensure the security of the United States" (47). FDR tacitly accepted Plan Dog (late Nov. 1940)—to the relief of his military chiefs—and approved military discussions between Britain and the United States in Washington. The resulting joint agreement, called ABC-

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1. The book originated in Dunn's 2016 Henry L. Stimson Lectures on World Affairs.

2. See her *Roosevelt's Purge: How FDR Fought to Change the Democratic Party* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2010) and *1940: FDR, Willkie, Lindbergh, Hitler—the Election amid the Storm* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2013).

3. 28 Nov. 1940.

1, made defeating Germany their highest priority, setting a “precedent for cooperation that would withstand the bitterest disagreements [and] ... define America’s paramount wartime strategy and goals” (155, 49).

Thus, keeping England in the war became a central goal for FDR; however, England was broke. While on a regenerative cruise in the Caribbean, the president received a message from Winston Churchill setting out his nation’s perilous situation. This missive “catapulted Roosevelt from calm, sun-studded seas back into the dark war-torn world” (56, 54). England’s plight was no surprise; for months the administration had considered schemes for aiding Britain. In the end, “it was Roosevelt ... who brought ... [the] threads together in an entirely original plan that had a fighting chance of winning acceptance” (69). In his press conference announcing the plan, he advised the nation to “get rid of the silly, foolish old dollar sign” in this crisis and provide Britain what it needed (67). Isolationists in Congress remained strong and adamantly opposed such aid. Dunn tells us that FDR needed “a masterpiece of persuasion” to prevail (52). He was determined to tell the truth to the American people with “no sleights of hand or obfuscations” (124). Lobbying very little himself, he successfully relied on members of his administration and such distinguished citizens as former presidential candidate Wendell Willkie to make the case. Even as debate dragged on (Jan.–Mar. 1941), plans were underway for distributing supplies—the “Anglo-American alliance was now indestructibly anchored on both sides of the Atlantic” (157).

Dunn writes that “FDR had elevated the US to a preeminent role in the world conflict,” but how could its industrial capacity, the largest in the world, be shifted to wartime needs (99)? Difficulties abounded during “the nation’s wobbling industrial mobilization” (112). Many manufacturers were reluctant to convert to wartime production. Some disliked FDR personally, a legacy of the battles over the New Deal. Others, like the “notorious Henry Ford,” a known anti-Semite, were opponents of unions and FDR-haters (110–11). The administration struggled to preserve workers’ rights, while avoiding strikes: “it viewed work stoppages in defense industry as threats to the nation’s survival” (109). The president struggled to find an agency and a leader to manage mobilization, but two developments were becoming clear to him: the economic royalists he had fought earlier were back on board (by 1943, a hundred companies were managing 70 percent of wartime production) and the United States would soon be “the greatest producer of arms the world had ever known” (119, 121).

To shake Americans out of their torpor, Roosevelt was determined to convince them without being misleading or overselling his plans. His masterful communication skills were fully on display in his announcement of Lend-Lease at a press conference that amounted to “a master class in high intensity salesmanship,” offering both “moral and practical” arguments for the proposed policy (69). In a fireside chat broadcast on five hundred stations to 100 million people (82), he persuaded Americans that the nation must be the “arsenal of democracy” (79). “His voice was beautifully modulated, almost intimate, his tone that of a neighbor explaining important matters clearly and without condescension” (80). A few days later, he addressed Congress (and the nation) in a speech announcing his concept of the Four Freedoms. “One of his most transformative speeches,” it gave the war “a moral meaning and purpose and established a basis for a postwar world of freedom, prosperity, toleration, and peace” (85, 93, 95).

Dunn portrays for us an FDR who saw the world as complex and ever-changing, yet loved to keep his options open in a White House where facts were in great demand. Logic and order were not his highest priority. He trusted his instincts (35, 27) and his lack of clarity on policy matters “often left his inner circle perplexed” (41). An “idealist without illusions” (175), he did not expect to achieve perfect policies. But Dunn perceives a bedrock of belief underlying his shifting tactics: for

her, Roosevelt was through and through dedicated to the “paramount values of self-government and democracy” (19). Public policy could “only move with the thought and will of the great majority of the people”; presidents educated the nation (39). Roosevelt possessed a deep commitment to American ideals. His speeches extolling moral and human decency gave “hope to the enslaved and underprivileged of the world” (178). In his third hundred days, he laid the “groundwork for an unprecedented expansion of American power and enduring global leadership” (63, 176, 181).

*A Blueprint for War* is well written and founded on a deep familiarity with the relevant primary and secondary sources. Its distinctive feature—and principal limitation—is its short, hundred-day time frame. Many readers will wish for a fuller, more systematic approach. And, indeed, the subject has been more exhaustively examined in many fine books.<sup>4</sup> This shortcoming aside, Dunn’s portrait of FDR is a welcome and inspiring reminder of the potentials of elected leadership in a time when not only foreign dictators but bitter partisanship at home threaten democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt has become a hero to many because of his efforts to prove Jefferson right: democracy is the strongest government. There were failures, of course, such as the internment of Japanese-Americans. But we should recall Isaiah Berlin’s observation that FDR’s “greatest service to mankind (after ensuring the victory against the enemies of freedom) consists in the fact that he showed it is possible to be politically effective and yet benevolent and human” and thereby “strengthened democracy everywhere” (31).<sup>6</sup> Many Americans long for just this kind of leadership today, amidst our own angry days.

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4. See, esp., James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: Soldier of Freedom* (NY: Harcourt, 1970). Two other books, though no longer than Dunn’s, take us to Pearl Harbor: Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1988) and David Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt’s America and the Origins of the Second World War* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2001). See, too, David Kaiser’s recent *No End Save Victory: How FDR Led the Nation into War* (NY: Basic Books, 2014), which presents FDR’s men as carrying out an idealistic agenda typical of “the missionary generation.” All four authors discuss the Atlantic Charter (continuing the Four Freedoms), the Victory Plan (for achieving Plan Dog/ABC-1), and the evolution of a naval conflict in the Atlantic (realizing the logic of Lend-Lease). Also relevant are David Roll, *The Hopkins Touch: Harry Hopkins and the Forging of the Alliance to Defeat Hitler* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013) and Michael Fullilove, *Rendezvous with Destiny: How Franklin D. Roosevelt and Five Extraordinary Men Took America into the War and into the World* (NY: Penguin, 2013), which highlights FDR’s desire for multiple perspectives and ever more information, and his willingness to reach out to men such as former opponent Wendell Willkie.

5. See, further, Lynne Olson, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America’s Fight over World War II, 1939–41* (NY: Random House, 2013).

6. “President Franklin Delano Roosevelt” [1955], in *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardie (NY: Viking, 1981) 31.