

Democracy And The Formation Of Foreign Policy:

The Case Of F.D.R. And America's Entrance Into World War II

*By Ronald Radosh**

F. D. R.'s Undeclared War, 1939 to 1941, by T. R. Fehrenbach. David McKay Company, Inc., New York, 1967, \$6.50

Discussion about the methods used by Franklin D. Roosevelt to bring the United States into World War II is not new. The dominant group of American historians have defended Roosevelt's actions as those forced upon the President by the course of Axis aggression. A smaller group of revisionist historians have argued that American policy makers followed a path that pushed the United States towards active involvement in what might have remained a purely European war.

The concentration on the revisionist charge that American policy contributed as much or even more than the Axis policy towards causing a new world war obscured a more fundamental charge levied by the revisionists--that while

* Ronald Radosh is Assistant Professor of History at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York. He is the co-editor (with Louis Menashe) of Teach-Ins U. S. A., Reports, Opinions, Documents (Praeger, 1967)

President Roosevelt publicly pledged to avoid involvement in the war, he deceptively took steps that made overt belligerency a matter of time. In the words of then Congresswoman Clare Booth Luce, Roosevelt was "lying the country into war." If the President had felt that his public antiwar commitments of 1940 had been rendered obsolete by events in 1941, as Charles A. Beard so ably expressed it, he had "constitutional and moral obligations to explain to the country the grounds and nature of a reversal in policy." Such an explanation was never presented. What Beard had raised was the question of the character of a national leadership which showed so little confidence in its citizens that it preferred to lie about the issue of war and peace. Such realization of the dishonesty of Executive rhetoric meant the need to question the substance of a democracy whose leaders left no choice for the public but acquiescence in the prior decisions of the Executive branch.

T. R. Fehrenbach is the most recent to re-evaluate F. D. R.'s method of taking the nation into war. Fehrenbach's book is not distinguished by the relating of any new or original material. Much of the work, indeed, is condensation and popular presentation of the writings of Charles A. Beard, William Henry Chamberlin, Harry Elmer Barnes, William Neumann, as well as the recent scholarly account of the same period provided by Robert A. Divine. One of the inexcusable omissions is any form of bibliography or footnotes. The result is that the uninitiated reader remains unaware of Fehrenbach's sources and the books of previous authors whose work Fehrenbach has obviously studied closely and drawn from freely.

Nevertheless, Fehrenbach deserves comment because of the unusual twist he brings to the material. Fehrenbach concentrates on the effect that F. D. R.'s policy had on the democratic ethos. Previously the majority of Roosevelt's defenders have argued that while the President may have actually deceived the people, he was acting, as Thomas A. Bailey once wrote, like "the physician who must tell the patient lies for the patient's own good." Certainly this meant that the President had not entrusted the people with the truth. But as Bailey argued, the masses are "notoriously shortsighted" and must be deceived into awareness of their own long term interests. Or, as F. D. R.'s key aide Harry Hopkins had put it, "the people are too goddam dumb to understand." Put simply, this is the old thesis that the truth must be kept from the people

approach permits enactment of a foreign policy otherwise opposed (and possibly prevented from enactment) by the populace, it also assures a permanent damage to the moral fibre of a democratic nation.

Among the group of Roosevelt's supporters, Fehrenbach distinguishes himself by acceptance of the validity of the major charges levied by the revisionists. He concisely, cogently, and persuasively reveals that the Roosevelt Administration took a series of major steps consciously intended to lead the country into a posture of belligerency against the Axis powers. Publicly, such steps were masqueraded as policies that would keep the peace and maintain American neutrality.

One example cited is the exchange of American destroyers for British bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland in September 1940. Fehrenbach does not mask the fact that this act violated neutrality statutes, was not covered by "cash and carry" legislation, and would not have been approved by the electorate. But Roosevelt avoided Congress in order to secure quick action, "avoid damaging debate, which might further divide the nation," and thereby assure that the deal went through. Fehrenbach also understands the implication of the move for democracy. "If the President acted," he writes, "the Congress and the public, presented with an accomplished fact, had no means of counteracting him. They could approve or disapprove - but they could not set the act aside." The problem is that in a democracy, substantive public debate must take place before acts are committed if it is to have genuine meaning as well as the chance of affecting policy.

Of all the secret measures taken by the Roosevelt Administration in 1941, none was more significant than the conferences with the British staff held between January and March. These led to agreement that the U. S. Navy would convoy all transatlantic shipping, a step that violated the Neutrality Act. What made this agreement particularly reprehensible was that if the populace had known, it would undoubtedly have repudiated the President. Rather than announce and publicly state why he felt such acts were necessary, F. D. R. "publicly took the position that he was against convoys because they meant shooting." These commitments could only have the final result of leading the United States into war. When Roosevelt ordered naval forces into the declared Nazi war zone beyond Greenland, it was inevitable that a clash would occur.

In his discussion of Japanese - American relations prior to Pearl Harbor, Fehrenbach makes it clear that resistance to Japanese aggression was not what motivated American leadership. Rather, it was the confrontation of the growing Japanese commercial empire in Asia with the West. Japan was seeking commercial expansion and prestige just as the Western powers, and in the process they had developed a "dynamic militarism" that worried the West.

Those Americans who were not willing to fight in defense of the West's empire (or desired empire) in Asia are derided. Herbert Hoover is accurately discussed as one who took the position "that the United States could not, and had no business in trying, to act as a policeman halfway across the world." Yet the intimation is that those in agreement were somehow wrong, although Fehrenbach himself admits that the war's conclusion saw Japan granted exactly what she desired before Pearl Harbor; namely the "opening up of the European colonial preserves in Asia, and also the American market to Japanese manufactures." A major reason for American opposition to Japan, he suggests, was the stake in Vietnam, then French Indo-China. Noting that American officials had become aware of its strategic importance, Fehrenbach writes that its possession by Japan was viewed as posing a "genuine threat to the Western position in Malay and the Indies." For what was at stake was the need to keep Japan out of the rich and productive areas in the Dutch East Indies. When the Japanese finally decided to stage their infamous attack at Pearl Harbor, its purpose "was defensive." The attack was not meant to lead Japan into war with the United States. It was designed only to prevent feared American interference in a declared or undeclared war against Japanese activity in the Indies.

Fehrenbach has only disrespect for those Americans who exercised their right of dissent and opposed the direction of American policy. Isolationists are ridiculed for their ignorance of the threat posed by the Nazis, and for endorsing Charles Lindbergh's belief that "if we enter fighting for democracy abroad we may end by losing it at home." While by 1941 it was possibly too late to avoid war, Fehrenbach's excellent discussion of American-Soviet diplomacy suggests that had the constant Soviet proposals for a common front against the Nazis before 1939 been accepted, it "might have completely stopped German aggression before it scored its early, vital successes."

But if the Western leaders had been blinded by their anti-Communism into failing to forge such a common front, hoping instead that Hitler and Stalin would fight each other alone; then the isolationist argument that war did not have to occur, and that its consequences might be negative within the United States, makes more sense than if opposition to "Atlantic escalation" is taken out of context. When he discusses Lindbergh, Fehrenbach makes the attack on "isolationism" meaningful to contemporary readers by the explanation that Lindbergh was "no more responsible for his actions" than are Bettina Aptheker and Staughton Lynd, who Fehrenbach argues have "inherited a mental outlook as well as genes."

The last comment presents the reader with an insight into Fehrenbach's real thesis. His argument essentially is that the secret measures taken by F. D. R. and the increased power in the hands of the Executive were necessary to assure American security; that in fact the American defense perimeter lies anywhere on the globe where the President sees American power and interests being challenged. What upsets Fehrenbach is not the decay of the democratic process begun by the Roosevelt Administration, but that F. D. R.'s tactics made it appear that his "serious war moves" seemed casually taken, though in reality they were carefully planned.

Fehrenbach believes that rather than withdraw to defend only U. S. national territory, or even extend defense to the Western hemisphere, defense of United States interests (which remain undefined by Fehrenbach) had to be wrapped in a "world view," to the "earliest point of engagement - even if this were ten thousand miles away." Fehrenbach's criticism of Roosevelt is that he was not a Winston Churchill--that he tried to develop a consensus behind a firm defense policy before openly taking necessary measures. He should have acted as a leader who brought the country to understand the need for increase of the security perimeter.

The result of F. D. R.'s actions was that the United States had actually entered a limited war against the Axis, solely through Executive action. By December 7, 1941 the United States already had a developed arms program, and had planned and coordinated future war strategy. By 1940, in fact, it had violated neutrality statutes by giving official Government aid to Great Britain, a belligerent power. These were, Fehrenbach notes, "enormous precedents." But Fehrenbach has merely shown what they

were, and has avoided asking the hard but necessary questions. He sees that the role of the Presidency was expanded, "without sharply defined limits to the powers of this office." This meant that the President could use his powers "to commit American power abroad," and that Congress would be unable to halt a strong President who used Executive authority for such a commitment.

But all of this is offered as proof that Congress cannot "be effective in the fields of foreign policy," and Fehrenbach suggests that international power politics requires changes in the government structure which F. D. R. freely inaugurated. Whether they were constitutional or not, or resulted in war, is beside the point, because to Fehrenbach war itself is "neither moral nor immoral." One of the problems facing any President is that in a democracy "the idea of foreign war still was met with prejudice." The public did not hold to a concept of "advanced defense" and clung to "territoriality, rejecting 'foreign' war." Hence many who supported F. D. R.'s undeclared war did so for the wrong reasons. They supported Roosevelt because they hated Hitler, rather than because they accepted "the concept of world power" and new strategic relationships. The result is what Fehrenbach terms a "new, liberal isolationism," since liberals acted as "long-term isolationists" who, once Hitler was buried, sought again to retreat.

Fehrenbach's message, it seems, is that those who really understood the need to fight in Europe and Asia in the 1940's should be consistent and support the present effort in Vietnam. Roosevelt in the '40's wanted to avoid at all costs a President's war, and to gain national unity for belligerency. Hence he saw a need to prepare for war while pretending to be for peace. Fehrenbach is critical because Roosevelt allowed a peace bloc to form around some Senators, which created an atmosphere in favor of neutrality. Fehrenbach feels that F. D. R. was hesitant in taking a belligerent stance because he paid too much attention to his "isolationist" critics. Instead, he should have squarely faced the fact that opposition "could in no way have halted or prevented any Presidential act--if the act were strongly pushed." Unlike other F. D. R. supporters, Fehrenbach sees no need for Roosevelt having acted secretly when public approval did not exist for implementation of a new policy. Here he departs from the apologetics of historians like Bailey. But his criticism is a tactical one. Roosevelt should have performed like Churchill and forged a new public opinion that was more sound. He ends by suggesting that "a truly great President and American would have no

concern for what might happen to him personally once he had committed the nation to an irrevocable course, anymore than a soldier charging up a hill," perhaps the most novel compliment to and rationale ever presented for Lyndon Johnson's policies in Vietnam.

In one sense, Fehrenbach is correct. The precedents established by F. D. R. before World War II have borne fruit in Johnson's policy in Vietnam, particularly in regard to the method of escalation. Fehrenbach's problem, however, is that his material does not lead to endorsement of his thesis. Rather, the material suggests that opponents of our contemporary arrogance of power must pause and reevaluate their analysis of Roosevelt's method of confrontation with the Axis powers. No better way to start exists than to re-read and learn from the monumental and misunderstood work by the late Charles A. Beard, President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941.

Beard succeeded in confronting the real issues; an area in which Fehrenbach most notably fails. He understood that one major difference between democracy and totalitarian government is that the Constitution unequivocally does not "vest in the Congress or the President illimitable power secretly to determine the ends of the government in foreign or domestic affairs and secretly to choose and employ any means deemed desirable by either branch of the government to achieve those ends."

If the precedents established by Roosevelt were allowed to stand, Beard had prophesied, it would mean that a future President might during an election campaign "publicly promise the people to keep the country out of war and, after victory at the polls, may set out secretly on a course designed or practically certain to bring war upon the country." Finally, Beard warned, the President might, as a "crowning act in the arrogation of authority to himself, without the consent of the Senate, make a commitment to the head of a foreign government which binds the United States to 'police the world,' . . . to dominate the world, and the American people are thereby in honor bound to provide the military, naval and economic forces necessary to pursue, with no assurance of success, this exacting business."

Beard's darkest fears have, unfortunately, already occurred. Just as in 1941 the passage of Lend-Lease was used by interventionists to argue that the Act authorized the President to do anything he deemed necessary to mili-

tarily defeat Germany, even launching overt war, (an assumption totally unwarranted from the terms, conditions and arguments used for passage of Lend-Lease aid); so today the Gulf of Tonkin resolution is interpreted by the President and contemporary interventionists as a blank check for the conduct of large scale warfare in Asia, in which American troops were to conduct the bulk of the fighting.

Ironically, reexamination of the old revisionist writings on World War II leads to important new insights. In past years the revisionist thesis, most often equated with conservative thought and politics, was rejected by liberals and "radicals" who glorified and vaunted the powers of the President, especially in foreign affairs, and who sneered at the obstructionism of Congress. Now, when the nation faces a President whom the liberals almost uniformly revile, they yearn for a Congress that would be more responsive to their wishes in blocking his adventurist foreign policy. Yet the powers enjoyed by Lyndon B. Johnson, who fights an undeclared war without Congressional consent, and who escalates constantly while proclaiming a policy of peace, is a continuation of the policy and powers initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt. For these reasons, many liberals today see that the old "conservative" critics were not so wide of the mark; that the much vaunted liberal ideal of "collective security" implied the increasingly naked reality of an informal Empire over the rest of the world; and that the praises sung to "internationalism" acutally meant espousal of interventionism, and that the denigration of "isolationism" meant concerted attack upon the few principled opponents of American expansion. By implication, these points may be discovered by a reading of Fehrenbach's book. Perhaps, despite its author's intentions, it will help a new generation come closer to the attainment of peace.