Franklin D. Roosevelt: The War Years, 1939-1945

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The remit of this book is seemingly straightforward and clear: its focus is on Roosevelt’s spoken words and the overall aim is to provide a detailed account of the president’s war years. That is done mainly on the basis of a chronological unfolding of events as published in the press, taken from records of the president’s press conferences, public speeches and records of his remarks to advisors, government officials, politicians and foreign dignitaries. This is an interesting and a worthwhile exercise in principle, but it does not always produce a coherent or an engaging history and in the end as a piece of scholarship it is not easy to assess. At times the narrative jumps from one issue to another without adequate context. There are too many examples of rather curious prose and far too many errors and questionable judgments. So, unfortunately, just as the book jumps around rather a lot, so does this review in order to demonstrate the claims just made.

The extant literature on all aspects of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s life and career is enormous and so the question with any new work focused on him is: what is novel in either sources or interpretative approach? The sources for Daniels’ work are already well-trawled: Roosevelt’s speeches, press conferences, other public papers, press reports, impressions of the president in contemporary documents and later publications in article, book and memoir form. While Daniels draws on a veritable host of sources all appear to have been well used by others, so there are no real revelations here apart from providing more quoted detail. And that is perhaps the key to understanding the rationale for this work and any claim that it might have to originality. Daniels explains at the outset that: ‘This volume like its predecessor (1), focuses on the words that Franklin Roosevelt directed at the American people’ (p. ix). Daniels certainly delivers on that commitment, but to what effect is debatable.

Daniels provides extensive quotes and delivers a highly detailed picture of the president’s working day. At times this prompts analysis of complex historiographical interest, such as the president’s understanding of the threat from Japan in the days running up to the attack on Pearl Harbor (pp. 214–25), discussions of the president’s political dissembling, his highly personalized bureaucratic style and wielding of power (pp. 71–2, 134.), the treatment of the American Japanese community (pp. 250–5, 258–9), and an area that is particularly well covered throughout the book, the condition of African-Americans and the Roosevelt administration’s attitude towards them (see for example pp. 117–120). All of such discussions are generally reflectively well balanced, but deliver nothing that has not been well covered before, though perhaps not in
The extensive quotations, speeches and remarks to advisors, confidantes and American and foreign officials, sometimes have commentary and analysis, but more often than not they are only accompanied with passing remarks. There are innumerable people mentioned as present at meetings, or encountered by the president in other contexts, or appointed by him to whatever bureaucratic arrangement he had most recently conjured up. But, so often, there is no follow-up in terms of who or what they were as real people acting on the political or diplomatic stage. The story is similar with the myriad of agencies and offices that came and went during wartime: they are all mentioned, some were clearly important and did very significant work, but many are often simply alluded to and it is unclear whether or not they ever did anything of significance. There is a lack of discrimination about what is important and what is not and so, for example, Leo Crowley, who became the Foreign Economic Administrator in the autumn of 1943 and played a major bureaucratic role in US economic warfare and had administrative authority over Lend-Lease, warrants only three passing comments (pp. 356, 426, 450). Unfortunately, the narrative frequently consists of detail without impact or much interest, for example in recording a two-day tour of Pennsylvania and Ohio in early October 1940, the description of one of the afternoons is as follows. ‘At Dayton that afternoon, the president first visited a soldier’s home and then inspected the army air force facility at Wright Field, today’s Wright-Patterson Air Force base. He was accompanied by James M. Cox, his running mate in the 1920 election (by running mate, Daniels means that Roosevelt was Cox’s Vice Presidential running mate), and Orville (1871–1948), the surviving Wright brother, and was joined by his son Elliott, a recently commissioned air force captain who was stationed there. After a private dinner at the Cox home, the president returned to his train for the only real speech of the trip…’ (p. 124). Such detail seems somewhat superfluous. It has nothing to do with the book’s main theme of relating what Roosevelt said to the American people. It adds nothing to our understanding of Roosevelt and his career and none of the characters mentioned have any significant role to play in the later narrative. The above extract actually sounds like a reiteration of a chronological diary of events without comment or explanation of significance. The account of the ‘only real speech of the trip’ is surprisingly somewhat similar. After being told that Roosevelt made a clear statement of American foreign policy reiterating support for Britain and other free peoples, denouncing appeasement, proclaiming inter-American unity and pledging the US to hemispheric defence, there then follows a further half page of more detail. This informs the reader that Roosevelt noted that it was Columbus Day and related that positively to American-Italian immigrants, that he failed to mention anything about African-Americans who were forcefully brought to America and that he pointed to what had recently happened to Holland, Belgium and Norway as grounds for rejecting appeasement.

Another example of inconsequential detail is taken from Roosevelt’s press conference on 8 January 1941. ‘At his press conference at the end of the first week of the new year, after announcing that Sherman Minton (1890–1965), a one-term New Deal Democratic senator from Indiana who had just lost a seat, had been appointed “as Administrative Assistant to act as legs for me”, he then explained at some length the just-issued orders governing the OPM [Office of Production Management] that he had talked about in the Fireside Chat on national security’ (p. 153). What then follows is an interesting quotation, which casts light on Roosevelt’s political skills, but why the reader is given the information about Minton is puzzling to say the least: he never appears again in the book.

Sometimes historical detail should be allowed to speak for itself, but there are other factors involved in this: first, accuracy when so much weight is placed on detail for crafting narrative historical explanation and secondly, good judgment.

Citing the New York Times 25 October 1941 as the source, Daniels writes: ‘He [Roosevelt] gave a pointedly nonpartisan radio address to the New York Herald Tribune Forum focused on Lincoln’s famous Cooper Union speech of 1860. The speech paralleled the challenge to American democracy in Lincoln’s time with the present challenge to British democracy and closed with Lincoln’s words: ”Let us have faith that might
makes right, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it.’’ Well, Adolf Hitler might very well have uttered such words, but to attribute them to Lincoln and even more poignantly to Roosevelt in 1941 is quite unbelievable. Anyone with a passing familiarity with what Roosevelt stood for would baulk at the credibility of this. Even if this were lifted directly from the New York Times as is, a historian should have recognized the error. The quotation should of course read: ‘Let us have faith that right makes might …’ (p. 129).

Sadly this is not the only case of inaccuracy, or poor judgment or, at the most charitable, of a terrible typo.

The impression that US military supplies to Britain were of major use needs to be discussed in a more nuanced way (pp. 93, 101). No American planes apart from maritime reconnaissance were used in the Battle of Britain and the destroyers delivered through the Destroyers for bases Deal in the autumn of 1940 took major refitting before they could be used. What these supplies did do was boost British morale with the implication of US involvement, and help the US gear up for war production.

The account of the Atlantic Conference appears somewhat out of the blue. Furthermore with such extensive reliance on newspaper reports and reporters it comes a little late to introduce Frank Kluckhohn as the White House Time’s reporter during the account of the conference (p. 179) when he makes his first appearance 20 pages earlier without being identified except in the accompanying endnote (p. 159). More importantly, when quoting the Atlantic Charter something that was of major importance to Churchill in clause four is omitted. Clause four is rendered thus: ‘Fourth, … the enjoyment by all States, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access on equal terms, to the trade and raw materials of the world’ (p. 180). As it stands, this does not actually make a great deal of sense. It should read: ‘Fourth, they will endeavor, with due respect for their existing obligations, to further enjoyment of all States, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access on equal terms, to the trade and raw materials of the world.’ Importantly, Churchill had insisted on including the phrase ‘with due respect for their existing obligations’ in order primarily to safeguard imperial preference tariffs. This was no insignificant matter and arose again in later negotiations. Finally regarding the section on the Atlantic Conference, one might be a little perplexed to read that it began Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s ‘physical collaboration’ (p. 179).

This reviewer is mathematically very challenged, but to claim that the cost of constructing the Pentagon ‘…was many billions above the estimate of thirty-five billion dollars given the president’ (p. 192), struck even me as absurd. And that sense of absurdity is confirmed on the same and following page when we are told that a Roosevelt inspired tax reform would yield increased revenue of $4.5–5 billion equivalent to ‘perhaps a third of all projected current-year expenditures’ (p. 193). In other words even the hugely and inaccurately low figure, according to Daniels, for building the Pentagon, of $35 billion, on this reckoning would still have been well over twice the government’s entire projected annual expenditure! The narrative should be in terms of millions, not billions.

The discussion of the allied campaign in North Africa seems to lack sureness of touch. There is no mention of the Battle of El Alamein and at one point the author makes it sound as if Churchill was praising TORCH, the allied landings in French North Africa, when in fact he was praising the British victory at El Alamein. General Bernard Montgomery’s success against Rommel is described as driving German forces back towards Libya with Roosevelt calling it ‘a victory of major importance’ (p. 296). This all seems appropriate, but it is a little odd not to name the actual battle. Several pages later after mentioning the North African landings but again not the Battle of El Alamein, the author relates how Roosevelt spoke of ‘a great deal of good news’ in the past two weeks. This is followed in parentheses with a reference to Churchill’s famous speech about the end of the beginning, which is potentially somewhat misleading. It may look to some readers not knowledgeable about the war that when Churchill said: ‘This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.’ that he was referring to the allied landings in French North Africa under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower: he was not, he was specifically celebrating the first major British land victory against the Germans at El Alamein.
The appointment of Lord Halifax as UK ambassador to Washington in January 1941 had little to do with the announcement of the Hopkins Mission by Roosevelt, as suggested by the author, and more to do with the fact that Halifax’s predecessor Lord Lothian had died in December 1940 and that Churchill did not want Halifax around in London (p. 150).

The communist alternative to the London Poles was known as the Lublin Poles or the Lublin Committee rather than the Moscow Poles as the author claims (p. 402).

The claim that Secretary of State Hull had been invited but declined to attend the Second Quebec Conference in September 1944 is suspect. Roosevelt had little time for the State Department and conducted summits without senior State Department officials present, with the notable exception of Sumner Welles. When the president went to Quebec, he left Secretary of State Hull and Undersecretary Stettinius behind in Washington with a promise to send for them if things political were at issue. When political issues did arise over the post-war plan for Germany, however, it was Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau who received the bidding, not Hull (p. 421).(2)

While one of the useful parts of the book’s narrative is the weaving together of domestic and foreign policy in the daily workload of the president, though with increasing delegation to James Byrnes and others in the domestic field, too often it adds little to the understanding of Roosevelt and the operation of his administration. A good example of this is a rather dense paragraph about the Supply Priorities and Allocations Board (p. 187): the board is subsequently only referred to twice more and then only in terms of personnel and nothing about policy formation or execution (pp. 192, 261).

Max Aitkin (Lord Beaverbrook) is mentioned three times (pp. 187, 237–8), but never introduced and only referred to as Beaverbrook in the text, though his full name and title are provided in the index.

The author makes two references to an incident at Newport Rhode Island in the First World War, the first indicates ‘embarrassment’ for Roosevelt, the second that there was a scandal at the naval base there. In the index the scandal is defined as sexual, but no further explanation is given. Presumably, as is the case with some other matters, this was discussed in Daniels’s previous volume, but authors should not assume knowledge of previous work to make current work intelligible.

Similarly the reference to Roosevelt not lifting a finger to allow the passengers of the St Louis to land is somewhat cryptic. Although we know it has something to do with Jewish refugees nothing else is said of the St Louis.

Admiral R.L. Ghormley is referred to as Admiral Chormley in a quotation from the New York Times 17 August 1940: it is unclear whether this mistake originates with the New York Times or the author, or if it is a simple typo by one or the other (p. 97).

There are far too many minor errors and some odd phrasing to say the least: a few examples follow.

‘quench British fears’ - quell? (p. 239)

Odd phrasing: ‘The AFL’s William Green said that national service “would not add a single bullet” to existing production, and John L. Lewis’s organ saw it as “the high-road to Fascism.”’ (p. 380, italics added)

Some sentences just do not make sense. ‘Other cabinet members each drew one number, and then lesser officials took over and a draft officials made the announcements in a process that continued through the night and the next morning.’ (pp. 132–3)
Daniels is a serious historian and he has produced highly regarded work in the past, but sadly this volume is disappointing.

Notes

1. Roger Daniels, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Road to the New Deal, 1882–1939* (Urbana, IL, 2015). Back to (1)

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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/178420