

FDR Was a Conservative



by Conrad Black

The *American Spectator* has been possessed by an unimaginable motive to run [extensive excerpts](#) from Francis Sempa's portentous new assault upon Franklin D. Roosevelt as a failed president. FDR's defenders are represented as a cabal of mythmakers.

Sempa, a lawyer from Scranton, bases his claim on non-delivery of adequately swift progress out of the depression; on dealing incompetently with Stalin, according to Ambassador William C. Bullitt; on being misguided by pro-Soviet opinions from his associate Harry Hopkins and treasury official Harry Dexter White and other communist sympathizers; and, finally, for being the founder and enabler of the managerial state, by which is meant all the overgrowth of government in these last 90 years.

These charges have all been made and rebutted many times before. When Roosevelt was inaugurated on March 4, 1933, there were machine gun nests at the corners of the great federal buildings in Washington for the first time since the Civil War. Unemployment was approximately 30 percent—17 million people in a population of 125 million, with no federal assistance for them. All stock and commodity exchanges in the country and all banks were closed or confined to withdrawals of not more than \$10 daily, *sine die*. The economic system had collapsed.

The argument that allowing events to follow their course would lead to an inevitable recovery is just moonshine.

Nearly half the nation's farms and millions of urban residences were in danger of foreclosure on mortgage default. Farm incomes were not at levels that could sustain the rural population. Industrial production had fallen by nearly half from its high, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average had declined since the autumn of 1929 by 90 percent. Almost no one disputes the talent with which Roosevelt reorganized the banking system, merged banks where necessary, guaranteed bank deposits, and made the federal government a profitable preferred shareholder in many banks as they worked their way out of the crisis. The banking system recovered quickly.

It's a familiar argument that Roosevelt didn't really end the depression, that only World War II did that, and that the New Deal's job creation performance wasn't remotely competitive with that of other comparable major industrial powers. That argument ignores the fact that Roosevelt's administration put up to 7 million people at a time to work in what would today be called workfare conservation and infrastructure projects. These people were just as surely employed as were the corresponding masses of young men conscripted into the armed forces and defense production industries of the major European powers and Japan.

Even pro-Roosevelt historians such as Arthur Schlesinger, William Leuchtenburg, and Doris Kearns Goodwin have been gulled by the Sempa argument. Roosevelt had practically all able-bodied people employed within two years, and they gradually were absorbed by the private sector as the 30s wore on. In the meantime, the Triborough Bridge, the Lincoln Tunnel, and an enormous mileage of highways and large numbers of airports and public parks and other useful national assets resulted from these programs.

As war threatened, the focus shifted to defense production and

included the soon-to-be world-famous aircraft carriers Yorktown and Enterprise. Even by conventional standards, there was no unemployment in the United States when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

William C. Bullitt was an unstable American internationalist, semi-in-law of the famous communist John Reed, sometime fiancé of Roosevelt's private secretary Marguerite LeHand, and Roosevelt's ambassador to the Soviet Union and to France. He oscillated in his views of the Soviet regime and from both embassies sent Roosevelt a constant stream of eccentric and usually misguided insights into what was afoot in Europe. Roosevelt liked his worldly style, which generally impressed Europeans, and found him a somewhat refreshing character, but after he forced the retirement of Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles over an alleged homosexual incident when Welles was drink-taken on an overnight train, Roosevelt forced him out and ignored him, denied him a commission in the army, and had him defeated as mayor of Philadelphia.

Once Roosevelt was dead, Bullitt became an inexhaustible source of malicious and generally fabricated stories about Roosevelt, including the infamous fiction that he had ever said the way to deal with Stalin was to give him everything that he wanted. As a historical source on Roosevelt, Bullitt is completely unreliable.

Harry Hopkins, a close Roosevelt adviser, was sent to Moscow and London entirely as an observer and his advice was taken seriously only on the precise matters that he was tasked to investigate. And in these matters, Hopkins's judgment was good and useful. Harry Dexter White was not in overall policy terms a man of the slightest significance, and Roosevelt barely knew him. All people of questionable ideological reliability, and there were very few, were neutralized early on.

Roosevelt was the chief architect of the strategy by which the Soviet Union took 90 percent of the casualties and 95 percent

of the physical destruction, as between the big three, in subduing Germany, and yet the main geopolitical prizes—Germany, France, Italy, and Japan—all ended up in the hands of the Anglo-Americans at the end of the war. Roosevelt dangled \$6.5 billion of economic aid in front of Stalin but didn't produce a cent of it, and he counted on the American monopoly of the atomic bomb to assist him in persuading Stalin to honor his Yalta commitments to free democratic elections in all liberated countries. The Western powers honored this and Stalin did not, and he brought down the Cold War upon himself, leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the demise of international communism.

Roosevelt died before the atomic bomb was tested but was, in fact, a master grand strategist—and made the United States the preeminent power in the world at relatively little cost, put in place the geopolitical facts and personnel to win the Cold War, and defeated the American isolationists. (It was Winston Churchill who wrote the celebrated spheres of influence agreement with Stalin in the autumn of 1944, effectively handing Stalin Hungary and Romania while dividing Yugoslavia evenly and taking Greece for Britain. Roosevelt never approved of that agreement, though it reflected military realities at the time.)

The fact that Roosevelt expanded the state doesn't make him responsible for the bloated government we all know now. He was completely opposed to what he called the "pauperism of the dole" and favored direct payments only to the retired or the handicapped. Roosevelt provided work for the unemployed and would be as disgusted as Sempa and I are at the extent to which state benefits have degenerated into the confiscation of money from those who have earned it and the gift of it to those who have not with little regard to the objective merits of their claims.

This latest anti-Roosevelt assault enables me to record once again my disappointment in American conservatism that it

hasn't adopted Roosevelt as one of its champions. He sincerely believed, as he [told](#) Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, that he was "the best friend the profit system ever had," and he felt that the United States had to have contented working and agrarian classes or there wouldn't be social stability nor any security for the wealthy such as himself. He was an altruist, but he was also a realist and often a cynic.

I often told my late friend Ambassador William vanden Heuvel, long time head of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, that it should stop making leftist contemporary public policy remarks and emulate the Winston Churchill Society, and celebrate Roosevelt's accomplishments in a broad historic context.

The answer to Sempa's claim that FDR was a failure is that in his 12 years the per capita income of the country doubled as unemployment was eliminated while he led the Allies to victory in war and an insuperable position in the peace that ensued.

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