



The United States and the Threat of Nazi Germany (1933-1939) Struggling to Preserve Democracy | Echoes from the Past

This introductory essay explores the United States and its reaction to the consolidation of power by Hitler and the crisis of survival facing liberal democracy in the years leading to war. America attitudes and perceptions shaped policy and unfolding events drove and shaped decisions.

A Missionary Generation

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was part of a “missionary generation”¹ inspired by their parents’ post-Civil War experience that sought to bring order out of the chaos of war. More specifically, Roosevelt’s generation rejected the “Gilded Age” (1870s-1900) of unregulated business expansion and the thirst for riches with little consideration of public and private morality. Disgusted by the materialism, unrestrained greed of their elders, and their belief in “market values,”² they were seeking a new moral purpose and more important tests of character other than wealth gathering. They were products of a new educational system after the Civil War that had taught them to stand up for their opinions and get things done through hard work, discipline, and clear language.



Many of those who took public office had been social workers concerned with the inequity of American life. Identifying any crisis in blunt moral terms, they saw government as a regulator of the economy and a last resource of distressed Americans. This is reflected in FDR’s 1933 Inaugural speech when he declared, “...restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit...”³ FDR rejected the fear-mongering of his opponents and acknowledged the reality of public and private despair by stating in that same address that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”⁴ It was this rejection of fear and getting things done that FDR and his generation embraced. By facing problems head on, trying new things based on humanitarian and not market values, and recognizing the needs of all Americans, the New Deal transformed the political and social landscape for all Americans. In the process, mechanisms and mindsets were established that would end the Depression, reaffirm American democracy, enable victory in WW 2, and shape the America in which we live today.

FDR and the missionary generation unified a frightened nation and gave it hope. The American encounter with Nazi Germany revealed much about the dangers of our own racism, bigotry, susceptibility to demagogues, and our limitations and potential as a people. That struggle continues.

Crisis of Liberal Democracy

By 1933 liberal democracy was crumbling. Across Europe democracies were being replaced by right-wing dictatorships all of which embraced antisemitism and the destruction of civil liberties (Italy, Poland, Latvia,

¹ For more information, see: David Kaiser, *No End Save Victory: How FDR Led the Nation into War*, (New York: Basic, 2014).

² The belief that the government should not interfere with how the free market distributes resources.

³ FDR’s first inaugural address can be found at: <https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/fdr-inaugural/images/address-1.gif>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Spain). The disintegration of democratic politics was a primary concern and a fear that permeated American society. Could the Republic survive? Did the democratic model based on capitalism have a future? Was a new model required? Some leading American intellectuals even argued for a temporary presidential dictatorship as alternative path to Fascism and Communism. The Constitution could be “stretched” in this time of crisis and allow FDR to serve as a temporary dictator based on the precedent of the Lincoln presidency during the crisis of the Civil War. During this wrestling, totalitarian regimes in Europe seemed to hold a special appeal to Americans.

The attraction of Mussolini’s militant fascisms could be seen in the wildly enthusiastic nationwide welcome of General Italo Balbo, Italian Minister of Aviation and founder of the paramilitary Blackshirts and first head of the Fascist militia in July 1933.⁵ Fascist sympathizers such as TIME magazine publisher Henry Luce praised Balbo while ignoring the violent actions of the fascists (soon to include the horrors committed in Ethiopia) and drew no attention to the parallels with Nazi persecution of Jews. On the opposite end of the spectrum, business leaders who felt threatened argued that the “New Deal” would inhibit recovery and FDR would become a “socialist dictator.”⁶ The very concept of democratic capitalism seemed to hang in the balance. This became more urgent as European democracies violently collapsed. Weighing over all of this was the close memory of the unprecedented slaughter of the First World War and the proliferation and advancement of modern, sophisticated weaponry. One-fourth of Americans were out of work and the bank crisis had destroyed middle class savings. This moment provided a test for the missionary generation.

The Southern Democratic Bloc

The Southern Bloc of Democrats, the backbone of the Democratic Party, embraced the progressive ideas needed to shape the New Deal and would be politically indispensable in passing the emergency legislation that would begin to revive the American economy. At that time, Southern Democrats dominated key Congressional Committees and were the gatekeepers of all legislation. Every law had to pass Southern scrutiny. Through the system of seniority, Southern Democrats controlled 29 of 47 House committees (i.e.: Judiciary, Banking and Currency, Agriculture, Military Affairs, Ways and Means).⁷ Without them, no New Deal. This power was even more disproportionate due to the failure to address Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S., Constitution after the Civil War. Every three in five black slaves counted as part of the Southern electorate in computing the size of Congressional delegations. With the overwhelming majority of their black constituents unable to vote, white Southerners enjoyed an unfair advantage and influence in Congress and in the Electoral College.

Backing FDR’s initiatives, the South showed how these policies could be turned in a democratic not totalitarian direction and gave hope to a democratic future. Ironically, as the Democratic Party won elections in the coming years the Southern bloc began to lose some of its influence as non-Southerners were elected. Although unable

⁵ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 62-29.

⁶ *Ibid.* 118-119.

⁷ “Power Of The Southern Bloc In Congress,” *History, Art, and Archives: U.S. House of Representatives*, <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/Southern-Bloc/>.

to retain the majority of Democratic seats in Congress, at no time during the FDR administration did their seats in the Senate fall below 49% or 41% in the House.⁸

However intent they were on supporting progressive legislation they were equally, if not more intent, on enforcing Jim Crow. While the New Deal would help channel resources to improve Southern infrastructure and overturn higher tariffs, help farmers and reduce high freight rates in the predominately agricultural South, the system of Jim Crow was reinforced by ensuring that its administration and oversight was in the hands of state and local officials. These administrators, for example, excluded all maids and farm workers from the New Deal which accounted for two-thirds of all black workers in the South. Money was also cut off to black colleges and farms. Thus, to speed the process of recovery, FDR's administration (where many key posts were given to racist Democratic leaders) had to ignore or accommodate the racial injustice and violence of Jim Crow. In so doing, FDR was able to push through a legislative process through persuasion and unlike the Nazis kept the separation of powers between the legislative and executive branches intact. What was the cost of this compromise?

Slavery By Another Name⁹ and the Roots of Jim Crow

Barbarism was advancing at home and abroad. As Anne Frank's family (among others) faced Nazi violence in Germany and made their way to the Netherlands, the U.S. witnessed an upsurge in lynching in 1933. Racial violence and the specific institutionalized racism of the Jim Crow South had become a fundamental piece of southern identity. Blacks, black life, and black customs were villainized as fears grew that the Roosevelt administration might undermine the system created in the years following the Civil War.

After President Lincoln's assassination in 1865¹⁰ so-called Black Codes were established in 1865 that created a new caste system that echoed slavery, segregated former black slaves, and made them indentured servants. Within six months of the end of the Civil War, white supremacy had been reestablished in states such as Mississippi, Florida, and South Carolina where cruel punishments were meted out.¹¹ The foundations of this new universe were buttressed by President Johnson's embrace of the former leaders of the Confederacy and their racism. Johnson began the process of undermining Reconstruction that sought to grant equality for black Americans. In vetoing the 1866 Civil Rights Act, Johnson explained away his inability (unwillingness) to protect blacks from massacres and intimidation by invoking the concept of States' Rights to argue that the federal government had no jurisdiction.¹² A Republican Congress overturned Johnson's veto and former slaves embraced educational initiatives of the Freedman's Bureau.¹³ With Reconstruction, former slaves now counted as full citizens and swelled congressional delegations. Blacks, who made up 36% of the Southern population, were elected to almost 20% of state political offices at the height of Reconstruction. This worked only if these new freedoms and rights were protected by the federal government. Southern states had no intention of letting

⁸ Katznelson, 152.

⁹ See: Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

¹⁰ Upon hearing that President Lincoln supported the concept of black suffrage, John Wilkes Booth supposedly stated: "That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God, I'll put him through." (James McPherson's *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*, (New York: Penguin, 2008), 242.

¹¹ Ron Chernow, *Grant*, (New York: Penguin, 2017), 368.

¹² *Ibid*, 371.

¹³ *Ibid*, 686.

that happen. Starting with President Johnson, blacks were quickly intimidated, murdered, threatened, and harassed until they were disenfranchised through poll taxes, literacy tests, and other tactics. Thus, white Southerners received disproportionate power at the state and national level in one of the great failures of Reconstruction.

Southern demagogues quickly pandered to anxieties that these gains for blacks engendered. A new mythology was developed and embraced that justified a new system. Although much of the post-Civil War violence in the South had been white against white violence (against the many deserters from the Confederate Army, those loyal to the Union, those opposed to the KKK), the arrests of thousands of blacks on inconsequential charges, or laws written to specifically intimidate blacks, or no charges at all, was deeply rooted in the institutions and culture of the antebellum South. Blacks were seen as the root cause for the lawlessness in a double standard that sanctioned white violence and murder.



The reality of post-Civil War Southern paralysis (physical and financial destruction; death and grieving; the terrible vulnerability of whites who now desperately relied on blacks to rebuild and survive) was transformed into a new parable. The moral universe created by the traumatized rebels re-envisioned Southern white superiority and self-reliance that excluded blacks. Blacks were depicted as having happily served their white masters who had “nobly” looked after them during a time of Southern unity and honor. The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* published in 1845 revealed the chilling psychology of this perpetrator framework rooted in slavery. This bogus Southern narrative was encapsulated in two Hollywood movies: D.W. Griffith’s 1915 racist *The Birth of a Nation* and 1939’s *Gone With the Wind*.¹⁴ The KKK, established in 1866, attempted to fight Reconstruction by embracing the new mythology, invoking the dead martyrs of the Confederacy (thus, the white ghostly hoods), and target and slaughter blacks and Reconstructionist Republicans, in order to continue the war for slavery. The U.S. Department of Justice was created under President Grant to battle the Klan and its offshoots. Grant’s federal war on the depravity of the Klan was one of his great successes. Such success reinforced the primacy of “States Rights” for Southerners bent on utilizing state sovereignty to suppress black Americans. Despite Grant’s intervention, or perhaps because of it, Northerners began to drift away from the ideals of the Civil War and reconstruction and embrace its own racism.

In 1873, a white mob slaughtered the black defenders of the Colfax, Louisiana courthouse (who had surrendered to the overwhelming white force) during an election campaign. Federal troops arrested some of the perpetrators. Unable to prosecute the murderers under local laws, the federal government handed down seventy-two indictments. There was a Northern backlash. Tiring of Reconstruction, fearful of military interventions, and deeply rooted in its own racism that allowed them a sympathetic ear to the new white southern narrative, the mid-term elections of 1874 handed control of Congress over the Democratic Party. This new federal power allowed the Southern narrative to gain greater traction as Congressional committees sought to destroy Reconstruction by opening numerous investigations into the corruptions within President Grant’s administration. In 1876, Confederate flags were omnipresent and Southern Democrats claimed that the confederate soldiers “fought honestly as American citizens for an honest purpose and in as honest purpose and

¹⁴ Blackmon, 179.

purchased the convicts and that had little incentive to waste profits on prisoners. In Alabama, companies were fined for allowing prisoners to escape. Many were killed or died in captivity.¹⁹

With this new system local law enforcement officials discovered new power and profits. County sheriffs and deputies received no salary. Justices of the Peace and certain court officials and witnesses testifying against defendants were paid from specific fees charged to those accused of criminal behavior. Each official act (serving warrants, making arrests, court fees, and even the fees to ship them to convict labor sites) had a cost that was assigned to the accused. This was in addition to whatever settlement a judge levied in a particular case. The original point of this system was to ensure outcomes between neighbors in rural settings where jails were expensive and impractical. Disputes were often solved when one party agreed to pay off a debt with a contract of labor. Thus criminal courts were often used in civil disputes where labor was treated as currency to pay off debts. In 1929 Missouri sheriffs reported making between \$20,000 and \$30,000 each in extra compensation for securing black laborers and selling them to local planters.²⁰



Convicts leased to harvest timber. State Archives of Florida.

Alabama combined these old legal patterns, new economic mechanisms, and the antebellum traditions of the emerging industrial pre-war South into a money-making venture that reinforced the mythology encapsulated in Jim Crow. An organized market for prison labor evolved (with labor agents) as states began to turn over large numbers of African-Americans to private companies. Control over this labor market was lucrative for the state (tens of millions of dollars went into Southern state treasuries),²¹ the sheriffs who supplied the labor, and the companies who contracted the cheap labor. Sheriffs, who received fees from defendants and any amount left over from the daily fees paid by the state to feed the prisoners were motivated to arrest and convict as many as possible and feed them as little as they could get away with. This had nothing to do with law enforcement. Blacks, disenfranchised, poor and unable to pay court fees, became prime targets for criminal warrants for any white looking to make money within the court system. The average span from arrest to conviction to delivery at a slave mine was seventy-two hours.²²

The county convict system soon seeped into the practice of white farmers who had advanced money to black laborers at the beginning of the crop season. The debt incurred did not lead to evictions, but to the swearing out of criminal warrants accusing black laborers of fraud at the end of the season. Aware of the fate of many sent to labor mines (such as the horrific Pratt mines in Alabama eventually controlled by U.S. Steel) and facing certain conviction, many blacks agreed to a kind of plea bargain where they would confess and sign a contract

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¹⁹ Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name*, 56-57.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 375.

²¹ *Ibid*, 8.

²² *Ibid*, 66.

sent to labor mines (such as the horrific Pratt mines in Alabama eventually controlled by U.S. Steel) and facing certain conviction, many blacks agreed to a kind of plea bargain where they would confess and sign a contract to work out compensation through labor. In this way, blacks could stay close to home, but were then returned to their previous tenant or sharecropping farms as uncompensated convict labor. These sentences were often accompanied by brutal mistreatment including chaining and beatings. When their labor debt was paid new charges were simply trumped up (violating racial etiquette being a favorite) and the same railroading through



Halifax, North Carolina, April 1938

the legal system would imprison African Americans indefinitely. Although some Southerners condemned these new practices, the majority embraced the idea of the honorable southerner who, embracing Plessy vs. Ferguson's nauseating cynical myth of "separate but equal," were doing blacks a favor and that abuses were rare. The moral universe of the perpetrators was reinforced and predicated on legal and moral constructs of white nationalism and pseudo Christianity. The same Social Darwinism that was shaping racist views in Europe played a significant role in reinforcing Jim Crow. As popular

culture embraced western expansion and conflicts as proof of white supremacy a whole new genre of fiction idealizing life and slavery in the antebellum South emerged to fill the psychological needs of many. As aging Civil War veterans found nostalgic connections as white soldiers (black veterans were not recognized as such) a cult of reconciliation developed that dovetailed nicely with the growing perceived guilt of "victor's justice" and the inconvenience of slavery. As the moral implications of the war faded and a new narrative was mutually embraced, a new reverence emerged for the myth of white southern "nobility". Shame of having fought and lost a war about slavery was replaced with the more acceptable myth of a war for states' rights. Any social shift to challenge that narrative was met with violent indignation.²³ When many black soldiers returned from World War I, for example, a new wave of lynching kept the system and its rationale in place. President Wilson, an entrenched racist who had been the first president to combine progressivism with racism, showed *The Birth of the Nation* at the White House (the first movie ever shown there)²⁴ whose star, Henry Walthall, was the son of a southern sheriff and the chief deputy at the Shelby County jail in Alabama.

Attitudes Within American Society

The Great Depression was the framework through which the United States reacted to both national and international crises. A variety of opinions, ideals and beliefs are a constant underpinning thread of American thought. With the pressures of the 1930s, the following came to the forefront. Pacifism had been the default position of many after the Great War (1914-1918). Most seminarians were trained with this belief and it resonated deeply within American society. There was a genuine sense that Americans had been dragged into the First World War by European empires. There was deep resentment and a growing sense of the need for isolationism. The United States would not be used as a pawn to reinforce empire and, it was believed, could

²³ This phenomenon still has power amongst white nationalists who see themselves as "victims." The neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, VA in 2017 is another example of white nationalists rallying around a mythologized version of history (Lee, the bloodiest general in U.S. history with no ties to the city, other than the Jim Crow era statue) galvanized by a sense of victimization to the historical narrative.

²⁴ President Wilson was a white supremacist who brought Southern ideas about segregation into Washington, DC. For more, see: Blackmon, *Slavery*, 357-360.

safely secure itself behind the Atlantic. With the Depression, xenophobic ideas about outsiders reinforced a nasty streak of nativism that believed that America was for “Americans” only. If we could keep foreigners out, we could keep their problems away from us and also protect the scarce job market from an influx of immigrants.

As in other parts of the world, antisemitism was another powerful force shaping American life. Antisemitism, broadly defined, are feelings, attitudes and acts of prejudice against Jews. Its deep roots in Christianity – one can argue that antisemitism is a creation of Christian tradition – found easy expression and acceptance. Although it was mostly social (segregated beaches, hotels, and discrimination at universities and in professions) it could also turn violent. For example, Jewish businessman Leo Frank was unjustly lynched by a Georgia mob in 1915 having been falsely accused of murdering the teenaged Mary Phagan. By the 1930s, a new virulent strain of racial antisemitism shaped the imagination. Often rooted in the invented Russian *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1902-03) racial antisemitism imagined secret Jewish power and conspiracies everywhere. Despite its exposure as a poorly forged, plagiarized, inauthentic hate-filled nonsense, the *Protocols* continue to grow in popularity even today. In the 1930s it was men like Henry Ford and his *The International Jew* (1920) (one of the sources Hitler utilized to write *Mein Kampf*)²⁵ and Catholic priest and popular radio host Father Charles Coughlin who propagated this hatred. In 1921, Woodrow Wilson ironically led criticism of Ford which culminated in a threatened boycott. In 1927, Ford’s apology and retraction, although self-serving, was well received. There is no mention of this incident in the Ford museum in Michigan.

From 1882-1968 nearly 5,000 people (70% of them African-Americans) were lynched in the United States. With FDR’s new direction and human rights language, lynching decreased in his first term from 65 to 20.²⁶ As Blacks made up 10% of the population, FDR insisted that an equal portion of Civilian Conservation Corps jobs be reserved for African-American youths. During the war years FDR insisted that Black Americans be paid an equal wage in defense plants even though black troops were segregated, led by white officers, and often brutally treated.



In 1934, anti-lynching legislation was introduced to Congress by Senators Costigan (D-CO) and Wagner (D-NY). Public pressure was beginning to build and the Sothern bloc in Congress reacted to protect their region from intrusion. Southern Senators kept the bill bottled up in committee arguing that such legislation violates states’ rights and the Constitution. Interestingly, they did not feel that way about New Deal initiatives that had created the strong national power in the federal government that was beginning to threaten Jim Crow. Senator Bilbo (D-MS) reacted to the anti-lynching movement to the NY World:

“It is practically impossible, without great loss of life, especially at the present time, to prevent lynchings of Negro rapists when the crime is committed against the white women of the South,” adding that the U.S. is “strictly a white man’s country with a white man’s civilization.”²⁷

²⁵ Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent 1889-1939*, (New York: Knopf, 2016), 176.

²⁶ For more details on the history of lynching in the U.S. see: <http://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/>.

²⁷ Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 86.

In 1945, Miriam Golombeck informed Senator Bilbo in writing that she and many women from NY's Hunter College had adopted a resolution for Congress to impeach him, received this reply: "The mere fact that I believe in racial purity with every decent and self-respecting Negro ought to believe in does not make me a fascist."²⁸ Unsurprisingly, Bilbo was also deeply antisemitic. Bilbo was a bit of an embarrassment with his brash and direct racism. However, he did express succinctly what others chose to say or embrace in more "polite" and non-verbal ways. In 1946, a predominately black group of Mississippi voters claimed that Bilbo had kept them from the polls through violence and intimidation. Although this might have put his Senate membership at risk, he was protected by the Southern bloc. More problematic was the discovery that he had illegally used funds from three defense contractors for his 1946 reelection campaign. A sick man, he died before hearings could be held against him.

The Nazis Given Power

Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. The Nazis embraced fear. Their belief was that challenging situations were to be solved through armed conflict and violence. After a period of aggressively consolidating power – all visible to the international community – Hitler shifted Germany to an aggressive foreign policy. Hitler was politically and economically inept and a reckless gambler, but was rewarded by circumstances and sheer luck. In 1935, the draft was reintroduced and in 1936, following the Olympics, German troops occupied the demilitarized Rhineland between Germany and France. These were clear violations of the Treaty of Versailles and a challenge to the League of Nations (of which the United States was not a member). France, without Allies, stood down and German anxiety gave way to euphoria and an almost religious belief in Hitler. FDR perceived the growing Nazi threat, but had to respond within the context of domestic politics and international restraints.



In 1936, FDR won a landslide reelection victory due in large part to southern support. The Democratic Party had majorities in both houses of Congress for the first time in over 100 years. Reaping the benefits of the New Deal and also reinforcing Jim Crow gave him the support of an unbelievable 97% of the vote in Mississippi and 99% in South Carolina.²⁹ Ironically, the election results brought many non-southern Democrats into Congress. As the Mason-Dixon dividing line began to blur, FDR believed that he no longer was beholden to his Southern democratic support and moved more aggressively on civil rights with the support of new, small, white liberal, Southern democratic elite. However, frightened by their potential loss of power, most white Southern politicians counter-attacked in 1937 and opposed both civil rights and the whole New Deal program. They successfully resisted FDR's attempt to purge three racist Senators (Walter George of Georgia, "Cotton Ed" Smith of South Carolina, Millard Tydings of Maryland.) All three won their elections despite FDR's public attacks on them.

Southern Anxiety

Southern anxiety and paranoia grew with the growth of the labor movement that by-and-large worked to integrate blacks. As labor began to supplant farmers (many blacks also moved north) unions worked for social reform through effective organization. Unions backed the anti-lynching movement and called for the ending of

²⁸ Katznelson, 87.

²⁹ Ibid, 169.

the poll tax that had helped to disenfranchise the black vote. FDR seemed less reliable to Southerners and Eleanor Roosevelt was downright menacing with her outreach to the black community. Black voters, in their sheer desperation, began to vote Democrat. The Supreme Court began to rule in favor of more equal rights and on June 25, 1941 FDR signed Executive Order 8802 that established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC). This was FDR's practical response to a feared black union march on Washington, D.C., but it would begin to undermine Jim Crow institutions. The South responded militantly. Within three months six lynchings took place and a rally was held at the Confederate shrine of Stone Mountain.³⁰ As southern rhetoric attacked unions and took on apocalyptic tones, the Southern bloc began to act independently and shift towards making deals with Republicans.

1937 proved to be difficult year for the Roosevelt administration. It would be a mistake to assert that it was possible to criminalize lynching during the Roosevelt administration. Facing a revolt in his own Party, FDR did not support the anti-lynching legislation of 1937 that he privately supported fearing that it would weaken him politically, divide Congress, and stop the more sweeping changes needed for all. FDR wrote to Walter White, Secretary of NAACP:

I've got to get legislation passed by Congress to save America...If I come out for the anti-lynching bill, [the Southerners] will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take the risk.³¹

Roosevelt, ever the practical politician, came to base his decisions, both domestically and overseas, on caution, patience, and proper timing.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Things now became even more difficult when the steady economic recovery begun in 1933 (unemployment cut in half in his first term) gave way to a severe recession. Two million Americans found themselves newly unemployed. A Gallop poll revealed that two-thirds of Americans had no interest in global events. Although appalled by Nazi and Japanese atrocities most Americans saw it as none of their business.

FDR's decisions were now marked even more by caution with an eye towards proper timing. Nowhere is this more evident than in foreign policy. Japanese expansion in the Far East had begun in 1931. U.S. foreign policy was based on the concept of non-intervention. Perceiving the growing threat of Imperial Japan FDR began a slow campaign to educate Americans about overseas threats and the need to rearm. Democrats remained silent about this and many opponents called for FDR's impeachment. Regardless, FDR began to modernize the U.S. Navy in 1935. In 1937, FDR shifted internal U.S. policy in response to growing Japanese aggression, atrocities, and violations of international law and tasked both the Army and Navy with preparing for possible war. The "Rainbow plans" shifted military planning from seeing threats as only regional (one color per country; Plan

³⁰ Again, another site of white racist rallies in 2016 where the mythologized Confederacy (Lee, Jackson, Davis) is literally carved 42 feet deep into stone. Its construction reflects Confederate mythology anxiety and justification of Jim Crow. It was the location of the second founding of the KKK in 1915 which coincided with the lynching of Leo Frank in Georgia. The bas-relief carvings began in 1916, but were stopped in 1928. In 1958, the Georgia legislature purchased the property and resumed the project in 1963. It was completed in 1972. Like many monuments to the Confederacy, Stone Mountain seeks to memorialize post war attitudes and myths.

³¹ Roger Daniels, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Road to the New Deal, 1882-1939, (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2015), 337.

Orange for a U.S. naval war with Japan) to global (rainbow, or a mixture of potential enemies). From 1938-1940 Rainbow Plans 1-3 envisioned a defensive war to protect the U.S. and the Western Hemisphere north of 10° south latitude.

U.S. public opinion towards Hitler and Nazi Germany varied in intensity. Some thought Hitler was bringing stability even though the press constantly reported that Hitler did so by eliminating opponents. Secretary of State Cordell Hull did not want to intervene in internal German affairs believing that that would make things worse.³² U.S. journalists continued to defy German censors and report on increasing Nazi brutality. American Jews, facing intense antisemitism at home, were split between publicly protesting the Nazis and calling for boycotts and those who preferred private diplomacy fearing American public reaction/retaliation. Book burning by college students were seen as foolish “pranks” by some and something much more sinister by others.

Interestingly, it was the Black American community that became an important early pressure group opposing fascism. In 1935, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia (Abyssinia). Ethiopia was one of the few independent states in a European-dominated Africa and a symbol of black achievement for black Americans. Haile Selassie appealed to the League of Nations who voted for sanctions on Italy, but got no support from the major powers. While America remained isolationist and ignored the fascist threat, Black Americans such as John C. Robinson and Cornelius R. Coffey took up the cause. The two men had tried to enroll in the Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical University, but their applications were denied. Robinson became a janitor at the school and soaked up what he could. Eventually, he and Coffey were allowed to attend special night classes after having impressed school administrators by building and flying their own aircraft. Robinson volunteered for the Ethiopian army in 1935, and was put in charge of the overmatched Ethiopian air force. He was shot in battle and targeted by Italian spies on his return to America a year later.³³ Robinson later became one of the later founders of the decorated Tuskegee Airmen. Known as the brave “Brown Condor of Ethiopia” he was a symbol to an entire generation of African Americans. He later returned to Ethiopia and died in a plane crash in 1954.

At the same time a public debate raged about sending a U.S. team to the 1936 Berlin Olympics (awarded to Germany before Hitler was given power). Two-thirds of American newspapers supported a boycott, but Avery Brundage, the president of the American Olympic Committee (AOC), argued that sports were separate from politics, decided to send the team and wrote in the AOC's pamphlet "Fair Play for American Athletes" that American athletes should not become involved in the present "Jew-Nazi altercation." During the Olympics controversy Brundage alleged the existence of a "Jewish-Communist conspiracy"³⁴ to keep the United States out of the Games. Roosevelt continued a 40-year tradition in which the American Olympic Committee operated independently of outside influence and did not intervene or express an opinion. The U.S. public had plentiful and accurate reporting on Nazi Germany.

³² Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013), 59.

³³ McCall, Matt, “Robbins gave African-Americans access to the skies.” *Chicago Tribune* [Chicago] February 10, 2017.

³⁴ “THE MOVEMENT TO BOYCOTT THE BERLIN OLYMPICS OF 1936,” USHMM, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007087>

Isolationism Slips

Japanese atrocities in China began to shift U.S. public opinion on isolationism. In September 1937 and AIPO poll asked Americans where their sympathies were in the fight between Japan and China. 43% backed China and 2% supported Japan. After the “Rape of Nanking” (December 1937-January 1938) 74% of Americans polled supported China. FDR knew war was coming in both the Pacific and in Europe and began to prepare the country for war.

Refugee Crisis

On March 12, 1938, Hitler continued his aggressive moves in Europe by annexing his native Austria in the so-called *Anschluss*. This had significant implications for the United States as it created a new refugee crisis (on the heels of the Spanish Civil War) of Austrian Jews desperate to flee the Nazi occupation. In Germany, Nazi anti-Jewish policy was yet to be centrally coordinated. (That would come later in the year.) Nazi policy had been to make life so uncomfortable for German Jews that they would leave of their own accord. Since 1933, approximately 25% of German Jews had left Germany. By 1935, German Jews made up an estimated .4% of the population with one-third living in Berlin. As patriots and professionals, many Jews refused to leave their country in its time of need. Realizing the urgency of the threat often depended on where you lived and how dire the antisemitism and violence was. Some areas of Germany were more antisemitic than others and German laws, unable to define “Aryan” or “non-Aryan” often excluded veterans and their families – many of whom were Jews. Harassment was often locally generated before 1938. Unlike Germany, the impact on Austrian Jews was sweeping and immediate. 185,000 Austrian Jews faced immediate persecution by Germans and their Austrian neighbors. An obvious option was emigration to the United States. However, to emigrate one had to be allowed to immigrate.

It is important to note here that the rule of law was very important to FDR’s missionary generation. Additionally,



FDR had to deal with political realities. In 1921, anticipating further immigration after the First World War, the United States Congress had passed an immigration bill that severely restricted European and denied Asian immigration. The law was discriminatory and sought to exclude emigration from “undesirable” countries. 3% of any European nationality would be eligible for the 358,000 available visas. In 1924, this law was considered too liberal and the US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) reduced the quota to 2% of a given nationality (based on 1890 U.S. census numbers) up to a newly reduced 164,000 eligible visas. A visa document was required from a U.S. consul in the country of origin and in 1930 the State Department rejected those

considered “likely to become public charges.”³⁵ The new law cut the quota for northern and western European countries by 29% and southern and eastern Europe by 87%.³⁶ In 1936, facing an influx of German (Jewish) refugees, the State Department added a requirement, in addition to all the other forms, that German applicants provide a certificate of good conduct from the German police. The net effect on Jewish (German) refugees was

³⁵ For more detail on U.S. immigration policy and restrictions see: <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008297>.

³⁶ “Jewish Refugees from the German Reich, 1933-1939,” USHMM, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005468>.

to drastically reduce immigration from Germany to 10% of the allocated quota during the early and middle 1930s. Based on the 2% quota, England had the highest eligible pool of 64,721 and Germany, as the second highest minority, had a pool of 25,957. By law, the Austrian quota for 1938 was 785.³⁷

FDR's initial reaction was to ask his cabinet of the possibility of passing a law to increase the quotas, but was told that Congress (especially Democrats in the Jim Crow South) would not approve it. After the record 1936 election, Republicans had made gains in the 1938 mid-term Congressional elections and FDR's political capital was at its lowest point. The German American Bund had begun to grow in influence and were publically organizing and demonstrating in favor of Nazi ideology and Hitler. The Bund tapped into American racism, nativism, isolationism, xenophobia, the desire for authoritarian leadership, and antisemitism. The Bund cooperated closely with Fr. Charles Coughlin. A glimpse into American antisemitism is revealed by a series of polls. In April 1938, 60% of Americans agreed that persecution of European Jews was either entirely or partly the fault of the Jews. The poll revealed an even higher disdain for immigrants as 67% wanted to keep all refugees out of the U.S.³⁸ In 1941 and 1944 another poll asked who the nation's greatest threat was. Americans responded in the weeks after Pearl Harbor (1941): 25% Japanese, 18% Germans, and 15% Jews and in 1944, in response to the same question and with obvious knowledge of the camps in Europe: 24% Jews, 9% Japanese, and 6% Germans.³⁹



Constrained by political concerns at home and wanting to help the Austrian refugees, FDR combined the German and Austrian quotas and called for a conference on refugees to be held in Évian-les-Bains, France from July 6-15, 1938. In the cover letter no country invited "would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of emigrants than is permitted by existing legislation."⁴⁰ This assurance was for U.S. public consumption and would also allow countries to attend who were also closing their borders. What was FDR's objective? Was this a political sham? In my view, and echoing his statement to his friend NY Governor Herbert Lehman of "I only wish I could do more,"⁴¹ FDR was doing the only thing possible. If diplomats could be gathered and refugees brought forward to tell their harrowing tales then maybe, just maybe, someone (not the United States) might step forward. Eventually, of thirty-two countries attending, only the Dominican Republic agreed to accept additional refugees. Sadly, grasping the immensity of the refugee problem that the conference highlighted, a number of countries without immigration quotas quickly enacted them.

Chaim Weizmann, the father of modern Zionism remarked that, "The world seemed to be divided into two parts: those where Jews could not live, and those where they could not enter."⁴² Following a July 3, 1938 New York Times cartoon depicting the plight of Jewish refugees, Anne O'Hara McCormick wrote the next day in the NY times:

³⁷ For immigration quota numbers see: <http://www.historycentral.com/documents/Immigrationact1924.html>.

³⁸ "Here's Fortune's Survey on How Americans Viewed Jewish Refugees in 1938," *Fortune Magazine* (November 18, 2015), <http://fortune.com/2015/11/18/fortune-survey-jewish-refugees/>

³⁹ Uriel Heilman, "What Americans Had To Say About Jewish Refugees Fleeing the Nazis," *Forward* (December 3, 2015), Read more: <https://forward.com/news/national/325895/what-americans-had-to-say-about-jewish-war-refugees/>

⁴⁰ Lauren Levy, "The Holocaust: Dominican Republic as Haven for Jewish Refugees," *Jewish Virtual Library*, Read more: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/dominican-republic-as-haven-for-jewish-refugees>

⁴¹ Breitman, FDR, 104.

⁴² Carson Phillips, "The Evian Conference: A Political Potemkin Village," *Prism* vol. 1 issue 2, Spring 2010, 25.



It is heartbreaking to think of the queues of desperate human beings around our consulates in Vienna and other cities waiting in suspense for what happens at Evian. But the question they underline is not simply humanitarian... It is a test of civilization... Can America live with itself if it lets Germany get away with this policy of extermination, allows the fanaticism of one man to triumph over reason, refuses to take up this gauge of battle against barbarism?⁴³

Despite criticism that FDR was only playing games with the issue it should be noted that FDR was the only world leader making a serious attempt to find a home for Jewish refugees in the late 1930s, though with limited success. From 1933-1937 more people emigrated from America than immigrated to it. From 1933-1940, due to bureaucratic, legal and administrative obstacles and the work of the paranoid and antisemitic Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the Visa division Breckinridge Long, less than half of the quotas were used for Germany and Austria. In 1939, the U.S. stood alone in accepting refugees and from 1938-1940 Jews account for about half of all immigrants admitted to the U.S.⁴⁴

The Evian Conference had a direct impact on Hitler. Believing now that Europeans and Americans did not care what happened to Jews and realizing that the self-imposed “Jewish problem” would not be solved through forced emigration, Hitler moved to a war footing. It had been public knowledge since May 1938 that Hitler and his generals were drawing up a plan for the occupation of Czechoslovakia. The Czechs had an alliance with France and an agreement with the Soviet Union that it would come to the Czech’s defense if both the British and French stepped in. As Hitler moved toward war, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain negotiated away the Sudetenland (NW Czechoslovakia that was heavily fortified) to Germany in return for an assurance of peace. The Czechs and the Soviets were not consulted. Hitler was pragmatic. Initially he wanted war, but gaining the Sudetenland without war fed the reassuring myth he was feeding a nervous German public that his ambitions were peaceful. Hitler waited for the next chance while the international community wrongly concluded that when diplomatic pressure was applied, Hitler acted like any other head of state and appeared to be reasonable.

Preparedness

With the Munich crisis, FDR saw war with Germany as inevitable and shifted military planning now to Rainbow 4. This plan, despite American antipathy to the British Empire, tasked the military to cooperate with Britain and France in a future war against the Axis powers. At the same time, Charlie Chaplin, who had lampooned Henry Ford in his film *Modern Times*, now turned his attention to Hitler. Chaplin and Hitler had been born in the same week and their careers in many ways mirrored each other. Chaplin had become the first person to effectively communicate with an international audience and Hitler, aping Chaplin, found a similar appeal with a microphone. When Chaplin visited Germany in 1931 he was thronged with admirers. Hitler accused him of being a Jew, something Chaplin was not, but something he did not deny either.⁴⁵ Hollywood was leery of producing any films against Hitler given the climate in the U.S. Chaplin, unlike



⁴³ “National Days of Remembrance,” *USHMM* (January 1, 2013), 5.

⁴⁴ For more on U.S. Immigration Policy see: Breitman, *FDR and the Jews*, chapters 4 – 5.

⁴⁵ *The Tramp and the Dictator*, DVD, Directed by Kevin Brownlow and Michael Kloft, London: BBC, October 2002.

many others in the international community, was not fooled by the Munich accord and decided to make a film “for the Jews of the world.”⁴⁶ He received threats from the Nazis, German sympathizers, the Motion Picture Association, and a group of isolationist senators led by Clark (MO) and Nye (ND) who complained of “Jewish Hollywood” pushing America into war.⁴⁷ Facing threats from a variety of other sources, Chaplin hesitated only to be reassured by FDR who directly contacted him and urged him to continue. The result would be a masterpiece, *The Great Dictator* that would be finished in 1940. By 1940, however, Chaplin sadly reflected that the film was now too comical given the seriousness of the Nazi threat.

As a result of Munich and a variety of other factors, the Nazi regime unleashed its coordinated attack on its Jewish community on November 9-10, 1938. The November pogrom was euphemistically called



Reichkristallnacht or the “Night of Broken Glass.” U.S. media reported on the “Jew-baiting” and American churches spoke out against the brutality. Despite outrage and condemnation by FDR, a Roper poll revealed that while 94% disapproved of Nazi actions, 83% of Americans rejected the idea of allowing larger numbers of German Jewish refugees into the country.⁴⁸ Disapproval and action were not linked in the

American mindset. The Nazis concluded that Americans would be outraged, but nothing concrete would come of their anger.

Outside of the U.S., Europe finally woke up to the threat of Hitler. *Kindertransports* (child transports) were established to allow for Jewish children (not parents) to escape. With the publicity generated by these rescue operations, American activists proposed to amend the Quota laws to allow for Jewish children to be given safe haven. On February 9, 1939 the bipartisan Wagner (D-NY) – Rogers (R-MA) Bill was introduced. Under the Resolution’s provisions,

10,000 immigration visas may be issued during each of the calendar years 1939 and 1940, in addition to visas which may be granted under existing law, to children who are not over 14 years of age and who now resides, or at any time since January 1, 1933, have resided in territory which is now incorporated in Germany.⁴⁹

Senator Robert Reynolds, Democratic from Georgia, led the response. He proposed five counter bills, one of which (Bill 407) stated,



...any nationality for which a quota has been determined and proclaimed under the Immigration Act of 1924, as amended, shall be 10 per centum of such quota...⁵⁰

In essence, Reynolds was proposing to gut the Quota system. Bill 407 would have, for example, reduced the current German-Austria combined quota of 27,370 to 2,737. Representative Pace from Georgia suggested that “every alien in the U.S. shall be forthwith deported.” Other self-proclaimed “patriotic” organizations lined up to oppose the *kindertransports* including the Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution and the soon to

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Breitman, 116.

⁴⁹ See Congressional Records: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1939-pt2-v84/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1939-pt2-v84-7.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Eli Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2017), 230.

be organized America First Committee (AFC). The AFC would be formed by Yale students in response to the call for a draft to prepare the U.S. military for defense (Rainbow 4 planning).

Within days of the Wagner-Rogers Bill going to committee a pro-Nazi rally organized by the German American Bund to “stop Jewish domination of Christian America”⁵¹ was held in Madison Square Garden in NYC. Tensions were running high and counter demonstrations were held in the city. How would FDR react to the Wagner-Rogers Bill?

Meanwhile, Nazi actions continued to erode support for isolationism. In March 1939 Hitler seized the rest of Czechoslovakia (in violation of the Munich Pact) and Italy invaded Albania. In April, Hitler mocked FDR’s demands to halt Nazi expansion. As war began with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 American public opinion continued to shift away from isolationism. An AIPO poll found that 82% of Americans blamed Germany for starting the war and by October 1939, 57% of Americans believed that the U.S. should change the Neutrality Act so that the U.S. could send supplies to countries under attack.



1940 was a presidential election year. No president had ever sought a third term and FDR was only convinced to run after the German invasion of Norway in 1940. The Democratic Party was unsure if he should run again and they were joined by Henry Ford, the Communist Party, the Bund, the America First Committee (led by Charles Lindbergh) and a variety of other FDR haters. Some believed that the U.S. was being pushed into war via a Jewish conspiracy (Lindbergh)⁵² and others feared a massive military would endanger the institutions of democracy. Isolationists feared being dragged into a war and especially rejected the idea of fighting for the British Empire. Even the Nazis actively worked to help the Republican candidate, Wendell Willkie defeat FDR.⁵³ Two-thirds of Americans opposed the Wagner-Rogers Bill and 85% of Protestants, 80% of Catholics, and even one quarter of American Jews (fearing a backlash) opposed letting refugees in.⁵⁴ FDR was facing a potentially devastating political firestorm. One final consideration to the deeply political President was that he had only lost one election and that was to Calvin Coolidge, the President who had signed the 1924 Immigration Act into law. It was in these circumstances that FDR decided not to publically support the Wagner-Rogers Bill. The Bill was not supported by the Senate and died in committee in 1939 and 1940. With the backlash in Congress and the attempt to destroy the Quota system, FDR sent administrative officials to save the quota by arguing that America was a nation of laws and that the world would wonder why legislators were gutting them. In the end, FDR was able to at least save the Immigration Act of 1924.

After the German advances in Western Europe American public opinion shifted even more. In the summer of 1940, Congress approved a massive rearmament program and America prepared for war.

⁵¹ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995), 122,

⁵² Read Lindbergh’s 1941 Des Moines Speech: <http://www.charleslindebergh.com/americanfirst/speech.asp> and listen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54ozdotStW8>.

⁵³ For more on Nazi meddling in the 1940 election see: David Stout, “How Nazis Tried to Steer U.S. Politics,” (New York Times, July 23, 1997). <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/23/us/how-nazis-tried-to-steer-us-politics.html>

⁵⁴ Robert Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2006), 85.

In September 1940 the Tripartite Pact created the Axis alliance between Germany, Italy, and Japan. The Selective Service Act was signed into law on September 16, 1940 and Congress approved a 400% increase in military spending. Although the Republican Party adopted an isolationist platform, Wendell Willkie was not an isolationist and supported developing a stronger national defense. He also acknowledged the success of the New Deal. In a stunning rebuke of the nation's newspapers (mostly Republican) and leading businessmen, FDR was elected to a third term, 449 to 82 electoral votes. FDR had saved and reshaped the liberal democratic experiment in a time of crisis and had begun the process of preparing the U.S. for war.



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