

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



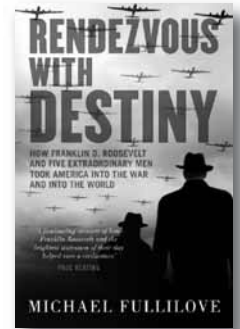
Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW

Rendezvous with destiny: how Franklin D. Roosevelt and five extraordinary men took America into the war and into the world

by Michael Fullilove

Viking, Penguin Group: Melbourne; 2013; 470 pp.; ISBN 9780670074877 (paperback);
RRP 29.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 580.15 FULL 2013



This book describes the highly unorthodox way in which United States President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945), widely known as FDR, conducted diplomacy in Europe in the early days of World War II. It delves into FDR's governing method; described by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as patterned on 'co-existence with disorder'. FDR distrusted the State Department as a poor instrument comprising mainly Republicans out of step with his policies. He sidelined that Department and its senior representatives including JFK's father, Joe Kennedy. Instead, FDR cultivated relationships with foreign leaders through personal envoys and made many communications via naval channels.

The polio that attacked him in 1921 at the age of 39 forced him to rely for political success, and indeed survival, on family, friends and aides; and makes his record the more amazing. He encouraged his wife Eleanor as emissary and investigator and she became regarded as a great American in her own right.

When Assistant Secretary of the Navy, FDR saw President Woodrow Wilson use a roving envoy (Colonel E. M. House) to good effect. There was no keener practitioner of envoy diplomacy than FDR and he even appointed a personal representative to the Vatican.

This book tells of five disparate individuals who were the inspirations and instruments of FDR's policy related to the European conflict. That policy was to support Britain and overcome United States reluctance to become involved in another European War. Many Australians would have read something of these men, but few would appreciate the ways in which their skills were used by FDR.

Benjamin Sumner Welles (1892-1961) had a privileged upbringing and entered the Diplomatic service. Roosevelt used him to clarify and assess in person the character and intent of Hitler, Mussolini and Churchill and their senior officials, plus British determination to continue the fight.

William J. (Bill) Donovan (1883-1959) was a World War I Medal of Honour recipient and Republican lawyer. He toured Britain's installations and confirmed its determination but lack of materiel. He is regarded as the father of intelligence in the United States.

Harry Lloyd Hopkins (1890-1946) was modest and incisive but suffered poor health. He was sent to Britain to explain Lend-Lease to Churchill and the British elite and was FDR's agent in establishing the critical three-way relationship between the United States, Britain and Russia. He was present at the Atlantic Charter meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941 and the meetings between those two and Stalin at Tehran in 1943 and Yalta in 1945.

Wendell Lewis Willkie (1892-1944) had contested the 1940 elections as Roosevelt's Republican opponent. FDR gave him the task of taking the 'Sail on, Oh Ship of State' letter to Churchill and thereby enhanced bipartisan support in the United States. Willkie spoke with good effect to the British and American people.

William Averell Harriman (1891-1986) was a well-connected ambitious businessman. He hurried the flow of aid, became part of the British social scene and later married Churchill's former daughter-in-law.

The diplomacy by these men enabled the meeting at sea between Churchill and Roosevelt that gave rise to the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. Fullilove is very perceptive when he states that 'the dangerous ideas (the Charter) contained would later excite oppressed peoples, inform the world's thinking on the (United Nations) organisation and even raise uncomfortable questions for Churchill's beloved empire'. It is hard to imagine that these outcomes were not on FDR's long-term agenda.

The rapid expansion of United States war manufactures arising from the Lend-Lease decisions enabled the United States to more comprehensively respond after Pearl Harbour on 7 November 1941. It is a tragedy (with resonances to Lincoln) that FDR did not live to see the outcomes he fostered and a strange coincidence that he died in the same month as Hitler and Mussolini.

The post-war successor to Lend-Lease was the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe, and this Plan was made more acceptable by its Lend-Lease precedent. Britain was the largest beneficiary of both schemes. The debt Britain owes the United States and its men and women who fought for the liberation of Europe and in the Pacific theatre is surely beyond measure (not to mention the debt to its Dominions including Australia).

This book is a prodigious work that originated in research while the author was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He was an adviser to Prime Minister Paul Keating and is now Executive Director of the Lowy Institute. The helpful Acknowledgements, Abbreviations, Chapter Notes, Bibliography and Index comprise one quarter of the book's 470 pages. There are well-selected photographs.

Fullilove comprehensively illuminates the pressures FDR and Churchill faced and the ways they handled them, and the Russian leadership. He begins with FDR's prescient forecast of June 1936 that 'This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny'. He has produced an authoritative and revealing tribute to the ways in which FDR shaped not only the journey, but the rendezvous itself.

Ken Broadhead