A survey of Franklin D. Roosevelt's strategic thinking prior to American entry into World War II reveals that the traditional historical narratives present a false dichotomy. Typically, FDR is portrayed either as an isolationist and reluctant belligerent being pushed into the war, or as an ardent interventionist seeking to enter the war by almost any means. Rather, FDR blended both of these policies into a coherent and consistent strategic approach toward the situation in Europe. Although his actions seemed to draw the United States inexorably into deeper involvement in the European war, FDR continued to pursue his goal of keeping the United States out of the conflict. Rather than dissembling or wavering, Roosevelt charted a steady and rational approach based on his strategic perspective.

By understanding FDR's strategy, it is possible to gain deeper insight into what appear as contradictory policies and actions on the eve of U.S. entry into the European war and, at the same time, into Roosevelt's strategic leadership. His approach toward the war simultaneously blended the isolationist aversion to war and desire to keep out of European conflicts with active efforts to overthrow Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime, the aim of the interventionists.

Aims and Strategic Approach

Following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Roosevelt pursued a conscious strategy aimed at keeping the United States out of the European war as a formal belligerent and, at the same time, ensuring the defeat of Hitler's regime. Within an overall policy of formal neutrality that favored the Allies, the Roosevelt administration looked for opportunities to act in pursuit of those two primary goals. Hoping to influence the outcome of the war, Roosevelt and his administration thought that they could bring about an internal collapse in Germany similar to the events in October and November 1918 that had hastened the sudden end of World War I and the demise of Imperial Germany.

Immediately before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Roosevelt resolved not to repeat the mistakes of Woodrow Wilson concerning neutrality prior to U.S. entry into World War I. FDR recalled Wilson’s reminder to the American people when war broke out in 1914 “to be neutral not only in deed but in thought.” In 1939, however, FDR rejected Wilson’s approach and deemed it “impossible in a situation such as exists in Europe today for a fair-minded people to be neutral in thought.” Once war did break out, FDR addressed the American people by radio and, echoing the isolationists, professed that he hated war. He stated, “I hope that the United States will keep out of this war. I believe that it will.” At the same time, Roosevelt discounted U.S. military intervention in the European war, announcing, “Let no man or woman thoughtlessly or falsely talk of America sending its armies to European fields.” He observed that a neutrality proclamation was being prepared in accordance with the Neutrality Act and...
traditional U.S. foreign policies that reached back to the Presidency of George Washington and a longstanding American tradition of armed neutrality. In contrast to Wilson's 1914 approach, FDR declared, "This nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well."2

Within the context of formal neutrality, Roosevelt deliberately pursued opportunities to aid France and Britain with munitions, aircraft, and supplies. On September 4, he discussed the question of neutrality with his Cabinet. With British and French declarations of war against Germany, the Cabinet decided to issue the customary neutrality declaration. According to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, however, Roosevelt "was not in so much of a hurry to issue the proclamation required under the Neutrality Act." The President wanted to provide Britain and France with "all the opportunity to export munitions of war, none of which could be exported after this proclamation was once issued."23

**Strategic Assessments and German Power**

To fully grasp FDR’s balancing of the two aims of his strategy, it is necessary to understand the strategic assessments accepted throughout Washington at the time. During the late 1930s, Roosevelt administration assessments envisioned Germany’s power as extremely fragile and its people already chafing under oppression and several years of full mobilization. Those beliefs persisted after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, and conditions in Germany were believed to be comparable to those in 1918. In September 1939, FDR predicted that the Germans emerged as the “masters of the situation . . . they will be in such bad shape economically” that they will have to open the blockade had produced undernourishment in Germany, a condition that “tends to undermine the nerves and morale of the entire population.” Stark estimated that without new offensives, German stocks might last until the spring of 1941.27 Not only would the renewed offensives deplete scarce German resources, but they also seemed in Washington to have been akin to the desperate German offensive on the Western Front in the summer of 1918. From the administration's perspective, there was no need for the United States to dispatch ground forces to fight in Europe. As long as France and Britain remained in the fight, it appeared that the German collapse was on the horizon.

Clearly, FDR’s view of the Battle of France in May and June 1940 was influenced by his own tour of the Western Front in the summer and fall of 1918 during the German offensives along the Marne and in Champagne. Furthermore, he became more optimistic after the Dunkirk evacuation exceeded all expectations. At a Cabinet meeting on June 9, the President surmised "that if the French can hold out for three weeks they will be able to win against the Germans."28 That same day, Adolph Berle, an Assistant Secretary of State and a member of FDR’s New Deal “brain trust,” noted that even if the Germans emerged as the “masters of the situation . . . they will be in such bad shape economically” that they will have to open

**The duty of this day has been imposed upon us from without. Those who have dared to threaten the whole world with war—those who have created the name and deed of total war—have imposed upon us and upon all free peoples the necessity of preparation for total defense.**

—FDR, October 16, 1940
up peace initiatives. Berle observed at the end of June, following the French armistice with Germany, “by all tests and standards that we know, a personality like Hitler’s and a movement like that which he has instituted, smashes up in time.” Moreover, the assessments FDR received from the British served to validate the views in Washington.

In the wake of the Battle of France, Roosevelt continued to chart a course for his administration to bring about a German collapse while minimizing the need for formal U.S. military intervention. Consistent with that strategic concept, Roosevelt announced in July 1940 “that we will not use our arms in a war of aggression, that we will not wage war in Europe, Africa or Asia is known not only to every American but to every government in the world.” To Roosevelt, the key was to maintain pressure on Germany until it collapsed upon itself. Economic sanctions and blockade formed the centerpiece of that pressure. With regard to American and British policy, he believed “that the only way out of the difficulties of the world was by the starving of the people of Europe, particularly in regard to their supply of fuel to carry on the war.”

Implementing the Strategy

To avoid Wilson’s mistakes, improve his span of control, and aid in formulating and condensing information, Roosevelt established the Executive Office of the President soon after the German invasion of Poland. At the same time, he reduced the ability of the Secretaries of War and the Navy to plan and conduct operations outside of his knowledge by placing the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chief of Naval Operations, and their planning staffs directly under him in the new Executive Office of the President. The next day he remarked, “Don’t think that I am not watching everything with an eagle eye.”

Reflecting the ideas that had coalesced in his thinking prior to entering the White House on how to deal with aggressors, FDR pursued a strategy based on coalition economic sanctions, naval blockade, moral suasion in the form of propaganda and psychological warfare, and airpower to contribute to the defeat of aggressors such as Nazi Germany. The result, FDR believed, would lessen and possibly eliminate the likelihood of the United States having to enter the European war as a direct combatant. That strategic approach, Roosevelt recognized, also entailed some risks. Strategic risk mitigation, furthermore, was a concept that he was accustomed to taking seriously. For example, as Assistant Secretary of the Navy on the outbreak of World War I, he confided that “it is my duty to keep the Navy in a position where no chances, even the most remote, are taken.” In December 1940, FDR observed, “If we are to be completely honest with ourselves, we must admit that there is risk in any course we may take. But I deeply believe that the great majority of our people agree that the course that I advocate involves the least risk now and the greatest hope for peace in the future.”

In the estimate he presented to the military in June 1940 as France was collapsing, FDR asserted that Britain would be able to hold on against Germany. He added that if the United States had to enter the war, it would participate “with air and naval forces only.” In contrast to the views of the President, American military planners and intelligence officers replied that Germany would crush Britain as it did France. They maintained that rather than send any further arms and material overseas, the United States should rearm its own forces and focus on defending the Western Hemisphere and interests in the Pacific. In the ensuing dialogue and FDR’s subsequent meeting with Stark and Marshall on June 24, the military came to accept FDR’s broader view of vital U.S. interests. As a result, rather than con-
the success of German submarines meant that Lend-Lease would be of little use if war materiel and munitions did not reach British forces

politically feasible. “American mothers don’t want their boys to be soldiers,” he observed, “so nothing really big can be done at present about expanding the Army. But the Navy is another matter; American mothers don’t seem to mind their boys becoming sailors.”

In January 1941, the administration proposed the Lend-Lease Bill, symbolically labeled H.R. 1776 and portrayed as an “aid to democracies” bill, intending that Lend-Lease would maintain freedom in the United States by aiding the Allies and also keep the United States out of the European war as an active combatant. On March 11, 1941, Roosevelt signed into law “An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States” and subsequently designated Harry Hopkins, an old friend and progressive reformer living in the White House, “to advise and assist” him “in carrying out the responsibilities placed upon” him by the act. Hopkins viewed his new duties liberally and enjoined government representatives serving on the Lend-Lease liaison group to “concentrate on ’licking Hitler,’ whether or not it comes strictly under ’lend-lease.’”

With the passage of Lend-Lease, Berle judged that by early 1941, U.S. foreign policy “really moved into another phase of things, a semi-belligerent phase.” He perceived that U.S. policy had undergone “a steady drift into a deep gray stage in which the precise difference between war and peace is impossible to discern.” Consistent with the concept of formal but armed neutrality, Berle rejected the thought that the President’s policy meant that war was inevitable. He averred, “Curiously enough, I am not sure that it means war, necessarily.” To bolster the administration’s case for not adhering to strict neutrality, Attorney General Robert Jackson advanced the argument “that ‘neutrality’ does not imply impartiality where somebody else starts an unjustified war.”

The success of German submarines in the North Atlantic in 1941, however, meant that the administration’s Lend-Lease efforts would be of little use if American-made war materiel and munitions did not reach British forces. Consistent with his view of American history and the demands of his strategy, FDR took a broad view of the Monroe Doctrine and during the election of 1940 noted that his policy was to “vigorously support the Monroe Doctrine for the protection of the American Hemisphere.” In 1941, Roosevelt extended the area covered by the Monroe Doctrine eastward into the middle of the Atlantic. In April, the United States occupied Greenland. Roosevelt subsequently justified the action by stating, “We are applying to Denmark what might be called a carrying out of the Monroe Doctrine” to prevent the transfer of Greenland to Germany. He also extended the naval reconnaissance patrols that had been operating in the Atlantic since September 1939 from approximately 300 miles off the coast to over 1,000 miles “for the safety of the Western Hemisphere” and to fulfill “the obligation we have under the Monroe Doctrine.”

At Iceland, U.S. Navy escort destroyers turned Lend-Lease convoys over to the Royal Navy for the remainder of the voyage to Britain.

The maturing military contacts between the United States and Britain led to a strategic planning conference in Washington from January 29 until March 29, 1941. The conference, the first of the American-British Conversations, produced a fundamental agreement on grand strategy known as ABC–1. In the Pacific, the two countries would maintain a policy of deterrence against Japan, and, in the event of U.S. entry into the war, the Anglo-American priority would become securing the Atlantic and defeating Germany and Italy. Although U.S. planners considered that a major invasion of Europe might be necessary, Roosevelt endorsed a joint strategy for victory over Germany that rested on complementing the British blockade with strategic bombing and subversion on the continent. Following the conference, American military planners dedicated efforts to revising the basic joint war plan, Rainbow Five. Meanwhile, Roosevelt and his advisors resisted acknowledging any requirement for sending a large American ground force to Europe again. Other forces would substitute for another American Expeditionary Force. By May, based on Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s directives, the War Department understood that the basic U.S. policy during the period of
so-called neutrality was that “British forces are to be considered as an American Expeditionary Force.”

Adapting the Strategy

Meanwhile, by September 1941, General Marshall faced growing pressures to reduce the size of American ground forces. Although he sought to preserve and possibly increase their size, he recalled that “proposals for the navy and air demanded first attention” and that “opposition to a large army was very widespread” on account of “a feeling that such an army was passé, no longer needed.” Clearly, FDR was sympathetic to articles in the media that depicted the potential U.S. contribution to the war effort as being confined to air and sea forces and manufacturing, and he requested that Marshall come to the White House to discuss the proposal to reduce the ground component of the Army. Compounding Marshall’s challenge was Secretary Stimson’s belief that the recent demonstration in the Pacific by nine four-engined American bombers amounted to “the reversal of the strategy of the world” and would allow the projection of U.S. power in areas such as the Western Pacific “over the Japanese obstruction.”

Marshall’s arguments, however, seemed to make an impact on FDR, who undoubtedly recognized the strategic risk if his assumptions about the effectiveness of sea and air power did not hold true. There is no evidence that Roosevelt continued to entertain the idea that American ground forces could be reduced to free up resources for air and naval programs. Instead, he increasingly examined ground force requirements, and Stimson was impressed when Roosevelt scrutinized tank production, “going over the figures with great penetration and great shrewdness.” Marshall’s arguments, furthermore, set the stage for Presidential consideration of the results of a more detailed study of requirements that FDR had requested in July.

By late September 1941, the military planning effort FDR requested began to coalesce in what became known as the Victory Plan. Stimson found the planning process “very educational and very helpful.” The process clearly impacted the estimates held by both Marshall and Stimson. As a result of War Department planning activities, Marshall had continuously revised his own assessment of wartime ground force requirements, from an Army of 2,000,000 in the summer of 1940 to the 8,800,000 troops called for in the 1941 Victory Plan. The planning effort also resulted in Stimson reappraising his view of wartime requirements. Reviewing the preliminary product, Stimson admitted he was “rather appalled” by “the size of the undertaking of matching Germany” but found that “the reasoning is good.” After discussing the Victory Plan for several days with the officers of the War Plans Division, Stimson characterized it as “a very fruitful study” and judged that, even if not adopted, it would “have a good deal of educational effect on the President.”

In late September, Stimson and Roosevelt had a frank discussion of the Victory Plan and, in Stimson’s words, “what would happen if and when we got into the war.” According to the Secretary of War, FDR “was afraid of the assumption of the position that we must invade and crush Germany.” Such a declaration, the President reasoned, would merely spark “a very bad reaction” and might serve, as Stimson recognized, “to stiffen and unite the German people.” Further, it might make direct American intervention in the war more likely by undermining what Stimson believed was evidence that “public opinion in Europe and also German morale” were being affected by German setbacks in Russia.

Not convinced that full mobilization or active U.S. entry into the war were necessary, FDR continued to adapt his basic strategy. He considered arming merchant ships, the solution he had advocated to Woodrow Wilson in early 1917. Although noting that the Neutrality Act specifically forbade providing arms to merchant ships, he observed to the press that during “the so-called quasi-war against France in 1798,” many armed merchantmen “beat off French privateers.” He added that in accordance with international law, merchant ships achieved similar results during the War of 1812 against British attacks. The following month, Roosevelt requested that Congress repeal the 1939 Neutrality Act and authorize him to arm merchantmen. In November, both Houses of Congress removed the major
restrictions of the act, allowing American merchantmen, armed and unarmed, to go anywhere legally and carry any cargo. On November 20, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox proclaimed, “Our vessels will be armed in two weeks.”

Knox proclaimed, “Our vessels will be armed in two weeks.”44 The situation in Europe seemed positive as well. Berle assessed that the German forces in the Soviet Union were “obviously risking everything” in a desperate gamble. Based on reports of German losses, Berle noted, “It seems increasingly clear that the German operations in Russia are approaching disaster.”45 On November 17, 1941, Coordinator of Information William Donovan reported to Roosevelt that the German people already were experiencing greater hardships than they had during “the years 1914–1918.” Donovan noted “that a considerable number” of Germans were “extremely frightened” of British air raids and that German losses in the Soviet Union had produced “a staggering blow” on the home front. Morale seemed to be at low ebb. Recalling the phenomenon of 1918, Donovan predicted, “One major setback or even prolonged slaughter and the German will to sacrifice and to conquer might hang dangerously in the balance.”46

Meanwhile, despite the optimism in some administration circles, the War Department General Staff’s estimates in the Victory Plan continued to have an impact. In late November, Roosevelt called Stimson, Knox, Marshall, and Stark to the White House for “a conference over the general strategy of the situation.” The threat of imminent military action by Japan, however, dominated the discussion.48 Complicating matters, on December 4, isolationist papers published a detailed account of the Victory Plan. With Roosevelt’s approval, Stimson addressed the disclosure in a press conference the following day. Characterizing the plan as “unfinished studies” that did not constitute “an authorized program of the government,” Stimson nonetheless posed the question, “What would you think of an American General Staff which in the present condition of the world did not investigate and study every conceivable type of emergency which may confront this country and every possible method of meeting that emergency?”49

On the evening of December 7, 1941, following the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, FDR dictated the war message that he read to Congress the next day. In the audience on Capitol Hill, Eleanor Roosevelt noted the “curious sense of repetition” she felt as she reflected on Wilson’s message in 1917. From her perspective, the Japanese attack on the United States had been an act of pure desperation carried out as part of “German strategy.”50 FDR chose not to request a declaration of war against Germany and Italy and continued to pursue a policy of armed neutrality in the Atlantic. Nonetheless, following the Japanese attack, he told his Cabinet several times that he expected a desperate Germany to declare war on the United States.51 Apparently, FDR had two motivations for waiting. By not asking Congress to declare war, he could continue to delay, and perhaps avoid altogether, U.S. entry into the European war. In addition, waiting for a German declaration of war on the United States would allow him to achieve Wilson’s goal of being judged by historians as having had war thrust upon him.52

With the declaration of war on the United States by Hitler and Benito Mussolini on December 11, Roosevelt’s hope of avoiding entry into the war came to an end.53 Roosevelt informed Congress that German “forces endeavoring to enslave the entire world are now moving towards this hemisphere.” The Roosevelt administration, however, interpreted the German declaration of war as an act of desperation by a regime coming apart and hoping to save its grip on power through...
further expansion. As if expressing a sense of relief, the President asserted that the German quest for world dominance “long known and long expected” had finally “thus taken place.” That day, Roosevelt requested that Congress “recognize a state of war between the United States and Germany” in the struggle between that employed other elements of American power and influence as well as the power of potential allies. At the same time, the adaptive aspect of FDR’s strategic leadership, and his consciousness of the inherent risks in any war, encouraged policy shifts, continuous military planning, and constant preparation for other

“the forces of justice and of righteousness” and “the forces of savagery and barbarism.”

On the surface, Roosevelt’s strategy might be judged a failure because it did not achieve its two immediate goals. Despite FDR’s efforts, the United States entered World War II in December 1941 as an active belligerent while Hitler retained his hold on power. Such a cursory assessment, however, ignores the final outcome of the war and misses FDR’s accomplishments as a strategist. Because of his strategic instincts, the situation after Pearl Harbor did not represent a complete catastrophe for the United States. Although Washington was only partially mobilized at the time, the preparations and planning that had been conducted since 1939 set the stage for a decisive U.S. contribution to the eventual defeat of Hitler’s regime and its partners. Over the short term, FDR’s strategic framework was not successful in achieving his goals in 1941, but it developed the plans and laid the foundation for what he undoubtedly considered essential to the prosperity of the United States, namely the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany and its partners and the preservation of a global system of free trade and open markets.

Following the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Roosevelt pursued an adaptive strategy. The centerpiece of his strategic framework was a set of goals that he derived from a fundamental appreciation of American interests and the threats to them. That goal-oriented framework enabled FDR to shift policies and mobilize and employ alternate means as part of his overall strategy, particularly as conditions and circumstances changed during the course of the war. Motivated by much more than military expediency or unilateral advantage, Roosevelt complemented military approaches with a broad political agenda

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**NOTES**


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