John P. Roche Post 1.22.72

How Roosevelt Lured Hitler

IF WE HAD KNOWN in 1941 what we know now, what a job we could have done on Franklin D. Roosevelt. The British have just released their Top Secret minutes of Cabinet meetings during that preiod, and they contain virtually conclusive evidence that we of the antipwar movement were right —President Roosevelt was deviously trying to get us into World War II. From every available platform in the nation we alleged that, in Charles A. Beard's formulation, Roosevelt was "trying to force the Nazis to force us to defend ourseoves." The record of Churchill's remarks to the British War Cabinet, after he had met FDR in August, 1941, vindicates us completely.

Churchill told his associates that the President "was determined that they (the Americans) should come in" but "if he had put the issue of peace and war to Congress, they would debate it for six months." "The President had said," Churchill continued, that "he would wage war but not declare it and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it they could attack American forces . . . Everything was to be done to force an incident."

THESE DOCUMENTS have been seized on by the American rightwing as confirmation of their cherished myth that Roosevelt planned Pearl Harbor. Indeed, so intelligent an organ of conservative opinion as National Review fell into this historical trap. Roosevelt did want an "incident" to justify an American declaration of war against the Nazia. But to jump from this to the proposition that he wanted the Japanese to attack us so we could go to war with the Germans is simply preposterous. Indeed, had Adolf Hitler not been stupid enough to declare war on us, American power could easily have gone roaring off into the Pacific, there would have been no Lend-Lease to save Russia from the Wehrmacht (which was in the suburbs of Moscow), and the British would have been left to fend for themselves.

In fact, the Japanese attack was classic proof of the thesis that Washington is a "one-crisis town," that is, the government has fearful difficulty dealing with more than one problem at a time.

IN 1940-41, the attention of all the top foreign policy figures was dominated by the Eurasian crisis, the survival of Britain first from possible invasion, then from massive submarine warfare, and the capacity of the Soviet Union to survive the blitzkrieg launched in June, 1941. The Japanese were simply pur on the backburner. Ambassador Joseph Grew's ominous repots from Tokyo were a distraction and besides, as the fatuous wisecrack put it, "if the Japs make trouble, we will mobilize the Boy Scouts."

No, that dog won't hunt. Roosevelt didn't want Pearl Harbor or a Pacific war. He wanted the United States to join the coalition to beat the Nazis and at every turn he was frustrated by the isolationism and inertia of the American people. When the Germans did sink an American destroyer — which had been engaged in the "neutral" activity of following a U-boat and broadcasting its location for the benefit of anyone who might be interested—public and Congressional reaction largely focused on the question: "What was that destroyer doing there!"

What these revelations do raise is a different and far more serious issue, namely, in the light of what we now know about Nazi totalitarianism, about the extermination camps and the institutionalized bestiality of Hitler's regime, was Franklin D. Roosevelt wrong in trying to get the United States into the war? Frankly, the longer I wrestle with this question, the more confused I become. It is a classic conflict between democratic theory and moral imperatives, one that unfortunately is anything but irrelevant to problems that confront us today.