FDR: The Untold Story of His Last Year

Was Franklin D. Roosevelt really as sick and incompetent during his last months in office as his critics allege? This week, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of FDR's death, a distinguished historian re-examines the old charge in the light of new evidence.

–*UPI.*

FDR with Churchill and Stalin at Yalta—"Roosevelt the idealist as well as Roosevelt the Machiavellian must be brought back before the bar of history."

by JAMES MacGREGOR BURNS

Late in March 1944, a young cardiologist at the United States Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Lt. Comdr. Howard G. Bruenn, had an emergency summons from his superiors. He was requested to conduct a heart examination the next day; his patient would be the President of the United States. The young Navy doctor was called in so hurriedly that he had no time to look over Franklin D. Roosevelt's medical records before greeting his eminent patient. He soon felt at ease, however, when the President came rolling down the corridor in his wheelchair, wisecracking with an old friend and waving genially to the nurses and patients who clustered in the hallways and peeked around corners. As the President was lifted to the examining table, he seemed to Dr. Bruenn neither disturbed by having to undergo examination nor annoyed by it—indeed, not especially interested.

Little could the young doctor know that he was about to examine a medical case that would become a political issue in later years. As the cold war deepened after World War II, it was charged that Roosevelt was too ill during his final year to carry the burden of the wartime Presidency; that he could not make tough strategic decisions; that he was, in Ambassador Patrick Hurley's words, "already a sick man at Yalta." Until now, the truth has been elusive. At Eleanor Roosevelt's request, there was no autopsy of the President; the official medical records disappeared; and the President's physicians, including Bruenn, chose not to publish their own recollections and records. This month, however, Bruenn is furnishing a full medical report on President Roosevelt's last year in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (April 1970). How does the old allegation about the sick, incompetent President stand up in the light of what Bruenn discloses?

It was with mounting surprise and shock, Bruenn recently told me, that he had taken the President's blood pressure that day in March 1944; he also studied his lungs and heart, read the electrocardiogram, fluoroscopy, and X-rays, and checked the earlier records. The Commander-in-Chief was clearly an ill man. Not only was he tired and gray, slightly feverish, somewhat breathless, and coughing frequently—evidently suffering from bronchitis—but his basic condition was serious. His heart, Bruenn found, while regular in rhythm, was enlarged. At the apex, he found a blowing systolic murmur. The second aortic sound was loud and booming. Blood pressure was 186/108, compared with 136/78 in mid-1935, 162/98 two years later, and 188/105 in early 1941. Since 1941, there had been significant increase in the size of the cardiac shadow. The enlargement of the heart was evidently caused by a dilated and tortuous aorta; furthermore, the pulmonary vessels were engorged.

Bruenn's diagnosis was alarming:

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hypertension, hypertensive heart disease, cardiac failure.

It is not clear, though, as to just who was alarmed. Bruenn reported his findings to the Surgeon General, Adm. Ross T. McIntire, an ear, nose, and throat specialist, who was also the President's old friend and physician. Roosevelt's condition had been wholly unsuspected up to that time. Emergency conferences were now held among Admiral McIntire, Bruenn, and a half-dozen other specialists and consultants. It was evident that the President had to be put on a regimen, but how much could a President—especially *this* President—be expected to follow the ordinary heart patient's routine? One or two weeks of nursing care were suggested but rejected because of the demands on the office; the invasion of Normandy, for one thing, was only two months off. Bruenn urged that the President at least be digitalized; there was some resistance, but the young Navy officer insisted that, if that were not done, he could take no further responsibility for the case. The doctors finally agreed on a program: digitalis, less daily activity, fewer cigarettes, a one-hour rest after meals, a quiet dinner in the White House quarters, at least ten hours' sleep, no swimming in the pool, a diet of 2,600 calories moderately low in fat, and mild laxatives to avoid straining.

The crucial question during these worrisome days was who should tell the President about his condition, and how candidly. It was soon clear that Roosevelt would not raise the question himself; he did not seem curious as to why he had been examined or prescribed a new regimen. He simply followed the doctors' recommendations to the extent he could and let the matter rest there. Bruenn, a junior officer, did not feel it his right or duty to inform the President. Evidently, everyone assumed that McIntire had the responsibility and would exercise it, but there is no evidence that he did. Perhaps he lacked confidence in his own effectiveness in passing on such portentous findings to his chief, especially if he should be asked difficult questions. Perhaps he sensed that the President would neither accept the significance of the findings nor act on them—that in a fundamental sense the President did not want to know. Perhaps he realized how fatalistic the President was, or perhaps he realized that no matter how well grounded the findings, there was a heavy psychological and political element in the situation, and that a President—especially one with Roosevelt's fortitude and self-confidence—could not be advised as authoritatively as the ordinary patient. Or perhaps, after all his optimistic reports on the President in the past, he was simply too timid.

Conceivably, he *did* tell the President, but that probably would not have made much difference. For a quarter of a century Roosevelt's health had been a personal and political issue; meantime he had become one of the most active and effective political leaders of his era. He had an enormous self-confidence in his ability to carry on, to win out. With the doctors' help, he might have reasoned, he would overcome this health problem just as he had the effects of polio. In any event, as a soldier, he would not quit while the war was still being waged.

On the face of it, Bruenn's findings would seem to support the charge that Roosevelt was an ill man at Yalta, and, indeed, during the last year or two of his life. Paradoxically, Bruenn's disclosures—which are as full and authoritative as anything we are likely to have on the matter—will force us to revise most interpretations of the significance of Roosevelt's medical condition during his final year.

For Bruenn's records indicate that during the last year the digitalis and the other ministrations seemed to work. To be sure, the President did have one heart attack—in the middle of a speech he was making at Bremerton upon return from his Pacific trip in August 1944—but he was able to finish the speech. He looked gaunt and haggard in that last year, but this was in large part because he wanted to carry out the doctors' recommendation that he lose weight. He conducted a brilliant re-election campaign against Governor Thomas E. Dewey; his "my dog Fala" speech was a virtuoso performance. If he erred later in the year in withdrawing Gen. Joseph Stilwell from China, it was not because Roosevelt lost contact with the Chinese tragedy; he was in close touch with the principals. He carefully laid the ground for American—and Soviet—acceptance of the new United Nations organization. His death on April 12, 1945, was not directly from a heart attack, but from a cerebral hemorrhage.

The crucial test of Roosevelt's last year, and of his health, was Yalta, where the great strategic questions of World War II converged. Bruenn's long-delayed report should effectively remove Roosevelt's health as a major historical factor. To be sure, the President's health was probably not good enough that last year to have enabled him to conduct a sweeping alteration of his foreign policy—for example, to shift to a hard-line strategy toward Moscow. But such a shift was virtually out of the question anyway; Roosevelt had made his commitment to a coalition strategy with Russia, and he was going to see it through, at least as long as the war lasted. In most respects, his final year was a culmination of the decisions reached earlier in the war, especially at Teheran.

But to remove Roosevelt's health as an issue in history is not to remove the historical issue. On the contrary, it is to sharpen the charge made by Roosevelt's critics after Yalta and ever since, the charge that in his last year in office Roosevelt knowingly sold his country out in a series of Munich-type appeasements of the Soviet Union. Most of the American official records are now open on this period. What today, a quarter of a century later, with all the advantages—and the humility—of hindsight, can we say about Roosevelt's decisions during that last year, especially at Yalta?

The two great assumptions made by Roosevelt's critics are that he was blind to the real history and nature of Soviet communism and hence was willing to trust it, and that as the commander of the greatest aggregation of balanced military power in history he was in a position to exact major concessions from Moscow about postwar arrangements but failed to do so.

The first assumption is not well founded. One cannot study Roosevelt's whole political and personal develop-

ment without crediting him with the most realistic apperception of the ambitions and realpolitik of rival leaders and their constituencies. This was the man, after all, who had vanquished his domestic opponents, had early recognized the nature of Nazism, and had conducted a kind of cold war against the Soviet Union itself (largely because of its war on Finland) during the months before the German attack on Russia in June 1941. Roosevelt had few illusions about Soviet communism as it was. He was not totally defeatist, however, about Soviet foreign policy—as it might be. Since we still harbor some hope in the matter twenty-five years later (and about our own foreign policy, too), it would hardly seem unpatriotic for Roosevelt to have tried to make postwar arrangements that might serve to undergird a continued Anglo-American-Soviet coalition.

The second assumption compels us to look at Roosevelt's main decisions about postwar arrangements—decisions shaped throughout the war, but formalized at Yalta. The question is: Did Roosevelt have the bargaining power to compel Russia to make greater concessions to the Anglo-American position than it did?

The cardinal issue during Roosevelt's last year was Poland. In fact, by 1945, Stalin had both moral and military control of the situation. By the time of Yalta, the Red Army had overrun Poland, after having suffered frightful losses. Stalin had possession of the real estate. It was understood, of course, that questions such as the shape and future government of Poland would be decided by the Big Three, but morally that expectation rested on the assumption that the Allies jointly had regained Poland—that they had fully shared in the sacrifices of the anti-Hitler effort. And of course they had not. From Stalin's point of view, the British and Americans were in no position to claim a share of the diplomatic spoils of Poland.

The issue cuts much deeper. For three solid years, Stalin had pleaded with Roosevelt and Churchill for a major cross-Channel invasion of France, in order to take the Nazis' pressure off his troops. For three long years, Roosevelt and Churchill had responded with promises. The cross-Channel invasion of June 1944 had come too late, from Moscow's standpoint, to make much difference in eastern Europe. The Red Army had had to go it alone. Far from getting major military aid from the Allies, Stalin contended, he had had to bail them out in the Battle of the Bulge.

At Yalta, Roosevelt was under no illusion about prospects for Poland. It had long been agreed by the Big Three that the war-racked nation would be picked up like a carpetbag and set down a few hundred miles to the west, satisfying Russia's appetite, penalizing Germany's, and taming Poland's. The cardinal issue was: Who would govern Poland, the Lublin Poles, a communist-dominated group nurtured by Moscow, or a genuine coalition of Lublin Poles and "London Poles," the non-communist leadership long sponsored by Churchill? A few weeks before Yalta, the Soviets recognized the Lublin Poles in the face of Roosevelt's and Churchill's urgent pleas for delay. Roosevelt decided to be relatively flexible at Yalta about Poland's new borders—which in any event had been essentially determined by the Red Army's advance, by understandings at Teheran, and by the position of Britain's Lord Curzon a generation before—but to insist on a democratic, independent, and viable Polish government.

From the start, Stalin was absolutely obdurate on Poland. When Roosevelt led off the discussion by saying that he had "six or seven million Poles in the United States" and that "the Poles, like the Chinese, wanted to save face," the Marshal shot back, "Who will save face—the Poles in Poland or the émigré Poles?" When Churchill at his most eloquent reminded the Marshal that Britain had gone to war with Germany so that Poland would be free and independent and that "this had nearly cost us our life as a nation," the Marshal asked for an intermission—and then came back well primed. His remarks suggest the absolute stone wall Churchill and Roosevelt were up against at Yalta. Said Stalin:

"The Prime Minister has said that for Great Britain the question of Poland is a question of honor. For Russia, it is not only a question of honor but of security. . . . During the past thirty years, our German enemy has passed through this corridor twice. This is because Poland was weak. It is in the Russian interest as well as that of Poland that Poland be strong and powerful. . . .

"The Prime Minister thinks we should make a gesture of magnanimity. But I must remind you that the Curzon line was invented not by Russia but by foreigners. The Curzon line was made by Curzon, Clemenceau, and the Americans in 1918 and 1919. Russia was not invited and did not participate. . . ." Stalin was speaking with more and more heat. "Some want us to be less Russian than Curzon and Clemenceau. What will the Russians say at Moscow, and the Ukrainians? They will say that Stalin and Molotov are far less defenders of Russia than Curzon and Clemenceau.

"I cannot take such a position and return to Moscow."

By now Stalin was standing. He preferred that the war continue and let Poland get more land at the expense of Germany. As for the government, how could they set up a Polish government at Yalta without the participation of Poles, who were not there? "They all say that I am a dictator, but I have enough democratic feeling not to set up a Polish government without Poles." As a military man, he wanted peace and quiet in the wake of the Red Army. The Lublin government could maintain order, while the agents of the London government had already killed 212 Russian soldiers. The Red Army would support only the Lublin government, "and I cannot do otherwise. Such is the situation."

There was a pause, and Roosevelt suggested adjournment. During the next three days, he and Churchill and their aides waged a tough and concerted campaign to win concessions from Stalin on Polish independence. Roosevelt warned the Marshal that unless the Big Three could agree on Poland—which to the President meant not recognizing the Lublin regime—they would "lose the confidence of the world." Churchill warned that 150,000 Polish soldiers on the Italian and western fronts would feel betrayed.

The pressure on Roosevelt during this period was acute. He looked worse than ever; Churchill's physician wrote him off as a dying man. One evening, after an especially difficult discussion of Poland, the President's blood pressure for the first time showed *pulsus alternans*. Although his lungs and heart were good, Bruenn insisted on no visitors until noon and more rest. Within two days his appetite was excellent and the *pulsus alternans* had disappeared.

Step by step, Roosevelt and Churchill exacted paper concessions from the Russians: that the Lublin government be "reorganized on a broader democratic basis" with the inclusion of democratic leaders from within Poland and from without; that free and unfettered elections be held soon—perhaps within a month—on the basis of open suffrage and secret ballot; that émigré leaders could take part in them. What was really at stake, however, was not the general formula but how much opportunity London and Washington would have, in fact, to influence the reorganization of the government, and to monitor the conduct of the elections. Even on this score Stalin conceded that the American and British ambassadors to the Soviets could consult with Lublin and non-Lublin leaders in Moscow, but the specific arrangements for holding and policing the elections were left obscure.

"Mr. President," said Admiral Leahy

when he saw the compromise formula, "this is so elastic that the Russians can stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without even technically breaking it."

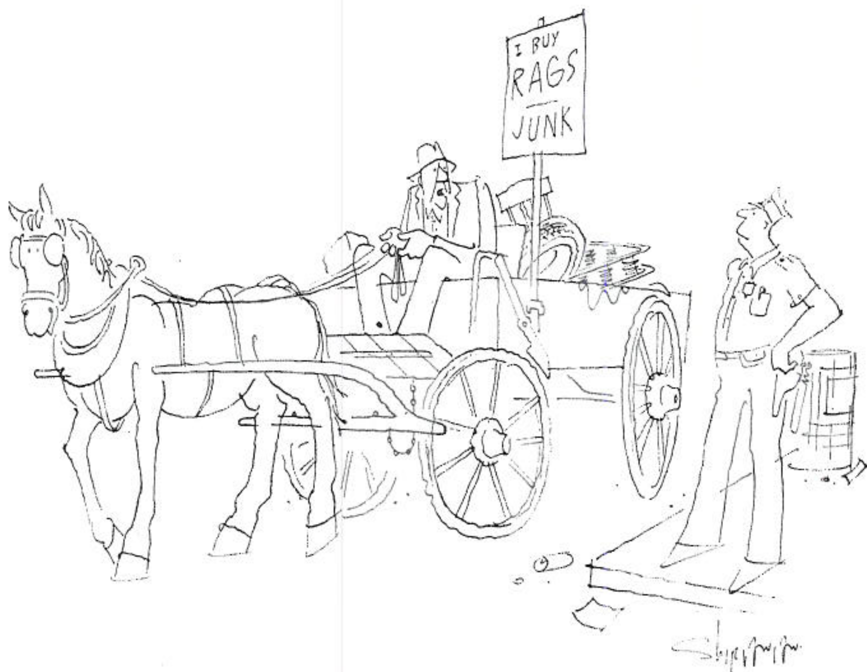
"I know, Bill—I know it. But it's the best I can do for Poland at this time."

The best he could do. Roosevelt was not ill at Yalta, or befuddled, or weak, or unpatriotic. As a realist, he saw that he had reached the limit of his bargaining power. He simply did not hold the cards. He wanted far more from Stalin than Stalin wanted from him. This fact dominated settlement of the other crucial question at Yalta: the Far East.

Roosevelt had no illusions about what Stalin wanted in the Far East, for the Russians had long made this clear—chiefly the return of the Kuriles and southern Sakhalin to Russia; and special railroad and port concessions in Port Arthur, Dairen, and Harbin. The Russians had also made clear that they would enter the war against Japan some time after Germany was beaten. Some Americans naïvely wondered whether Stalin would make good on this promise; actually, there had never been any question whether Stalin would be in on the Far Eastern kill. The American military was desperately anxious that the Soviets share the burden of the final conquest of Japan. It was expected to be very costly. One million Anglo-American casualties were forecast—and many more if the Russians did not come into the war on the continent.

But Stalin—and probably Roosevelt, too—knew that what was crucial was not the fact of Soviet participation but its timing and strength. And here Stalin was in the delicious situation of having Roosevelt and Churchill in just the position that they had had him for three long years. He could delay his Far East attack until London and Washington had suffered terrible losses in overcoming the home islands—and then he could march on the mainland against the collapsing Japanese forces there. In Europe, his allies had made the Red Army take the bloodbath; now he could let the Americans and British carry the burden of battle, and he could take his share of the spoils. It was Roosevelt's task at Yalta to induce Stalin to come into the Far Eastern war at a time that would be advantageous to the British and Americans, not just the Russians. This Stalin agreed to do—but for his price in territory and concessions.

Instead of "bribing" Russia to come into the Far Eastern war, why did Roosevelt not rely on the atom bomb to defeat Japan? Was this proof of his ebbing health? Actually, the President kept in close touch with the Manhattan Project; at the end of 1944, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson had told him that the first bomb (but without previous full-scale testing) would be ready about August 1, 1945. There was little indication, however, that the A-bomb, even if operative, would be effective against the military situation the Allies most feared—millions of Japanese soldiers (and civilians) fanatically resisting in caves and entrenchments along hundreds of miles of Japan's coasts and mountain ranges.



"I felt it was my civic duty to come out of retirement."

So in the Far East as well as in Poland there was an imbalance between what Stalin was asking of Roosevelt and what Roosevelt wanted from Stalin. All the Marshal really sought was legitimacy for dominating territory most of which he had the military power to control anyway. A third issue at Yalta, the nature of the new United Nations organization, was another case of imbalance; Roosevelt wanted a Soviet commitment to the United States, and Stalin was playing cool. In general, Roosevelt did the best he could with the strategic resources he had.

But we cannot leave the matter there. Why was Roosevelt's bargaining position so poor? The answers to this question are multifold: the Soviets' stupendous counterattack against Hitler, the weaknesses of a coalition divided by history and ideology, and simple geography and military power. But if we ask to what extent Roosevelt was responsible for his own strategic plight during his last year, the answer lies in part in his brilliance as Commander-in-Chief as compared with his failures as grand strategist. As Commander-in-Chief he conserved the lives of American soldiers in Europe and made a deal with Stalin to conserve them in the Pacific; he presided over a series of stunning military victories after 1942; but he bought these military victories at a political price. That price was exacted at Yalta.

Yet we cannot leave the matter even there. Roosevelt was not a mere military opportunist or improviser. He had exalted political goals; few leaders in history have defined them with such eloquence and persistence. But he was a deeply divided man. His major failing was that he acted out the parts of both improviser and man of principle without always seeing the interrelation of the two. He was a practical man who proceeded now boldly, now cautiously, step by step toward immediate ends. He was also a dreamer and a sermonizer who spelled out lofty goals. He was both a Soldier of the Faith, battling with his warrior comrades for an ideology of peace and freedom, and a Prince of the State, protecting the interests of his nation in a threatening world. The fact that his faith was more a set of attitudes than a firmly grounded moral code, that it embraced hope verging on utopianism and sentiment bordering on sentimentality—all this made his credo evocative but also soft and pasty, so that it crumbled easily under the press of harsh political alternatives and strategic decisions.

For a quarter-century now, Roosevelt has been under attack for his lack of

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"realism" during that last year. Perhaps a new generation of scholars and students is coming along that will pay more attention to Roosevelt the idealist. Without question he acted in large part on the basis of faith rather than realpolitik. At the final banquet at Yalta, he spoke of the time in 1933 when Eleanor Roosevelt had gone to a country town to open a school and had found on a classroom wall there a map of the world with a large, empty, unnamed blank space for the Soviet Union. Roosevelt felt that great progress had been made since his recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933; he had faith that more progress would be made. He was trying always to lift people out of their narrow and short-sighted ways and attitudes, at the risk of being called a utopian, an appeaser, or a dupe.

He picked up Woodrow Wilson's fallen banner, fashioned new symbols and programs to realize old ideals of peace and democracy, overcame his enemies with sword and pen, and died in a final exhausting effort to build a world citadel of freedom. In a day when we are trying to find out where we went wrong, how we can find our way again, how we can re-establish a principled and even idealistic foreign policy—in this day Roosevelt the idealist as well as Roosevelt the Machiavellian must be brought back before the bar of history.

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Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.

The — — — — — — — sky
gives promise of the day,

Gives — — — — — — — of a
life that has no end,

And makes the distant goal for
which I pray

Seem close to me as is my
— — — — — — — friend.

—A.S.

(*Answer on page 69*)

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