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Topics: F. D. R. After Twenty-Five Years

By ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER Jr.

It is now a quarter century since that fragrant April day in 1945 when a shaken world heard that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was dead. As the rushing years have crowded our minds with new issues and has undergone fluctuation and anxieties, F.D.R.'s reputation vicissitude. Older people, to the end of their days, will never forget when and where they heard the news of his death; but the young of 1970 find him a remote and not especially "relevant" figure.

His place in history remains commanding. But the nature of his historical role is still controversial. Time, however, has altered the terms of the controversy. Fifteen years ago, Franklin Roosevelt was under attack chiefly for foreign policy. He had, we were told, schemed to bring America into war; contrived the Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor, sold Eastern Europe and China into bondage at Yalta, engaged in ill-judged and demagogic assault on European colonialism.

One hears little of such accusations today, except from the dwindling ring of professional Roosevelt-haters. Far from an all-out interventionist, Roosevelt was regarded by the hawks of 1940-41 as unduly cautious and hesitant. The

Pearl Harbor charge has long since been retired to the museum of historical curiosities. As for Yalta, if Stalin could pursue his purposes only by breaking the Yalta agreements, then those agreements, if kept, would have confined Soviet power and therefore hardly constituted a great betrayal.

Against the backdrop of Vietnam, Roosevelt's recognition of the power of awakened nationalism in the colonial world looks better than ever. In 1943 he proposed that Indochina, instead of being returned to France, should be prepared for independence. Had his recommendations been followed, fifty thousand Americans and countless Vietnamese, now dead, would be alive today.

Roosevelt and His Critics

Fifteen years ago, when F.D.R.'s critics were condemning his foreign policy, his domestic policy was generally accounted a success. A new Republican Administration, coming to power after two decades of fulmination against the New Deal, was quietly ratifying the Roosevelt program of domestic reform. Few voices were left, outside Phoenix, Arizona, to challenge the once heretical notion that the national government had an obligation to intervene in order to civilize a

disorderly and brutal economy.

Today it is precisely Roosevelt's domestic policy that is under the more persistent criticism; and, where the right led the assault fifteen years ago, the left leads the assault today. F.D.R. the indictment runs, was the cunning protector of corporate capitalism. He failed to change the structure of power and income, to rescue the poor, to end racial oppression.

All he did, a young radical told me the other day, was to "abort the revolution by incremental gestures." At the same time, he dangerously cultivated a mood for charismatic mass politics, dangerously strengthened the Presidency, dangerously concentrated power in the national government. In foreign affairs, he was an imperialist who went to war against Germany and Japan because they were invading markets required by American capitalism. Norman Mailer has even said, "The ultimate end of every New Deal is burning children in Vietnam." Roosevelt will survive this assault from the left as he has survived the earlier assault from the right.

If Wilson was the philosopher in the White House, F.D.R. was the artist among our Presidents, composing his prophecy of the

American future out of the most varied of palettes and with bold and confident brush—and persuading the majority of his countrymen to see the world as he saw it.

The Roosevelt Legacy

His power sprang from his preternatural sensitivity to the emerging social moods and needs of his time—this allied with astute realism and unlimited resourcefulness about means and a generous, buoyant, at times almost ingenuous, idealism about ends. He led our nation through a crisis of confidence by convincing the American people that they had unsuspected reserves of decency, steadfastness and concern. He defeated the grand ideologists of his age by showing how experiment could overcome dogma, in peace and in war.

His policies were imperfect, his solutions incomplete; but the spirit in which he confronted the American condition—that exhilarating combination of gaiety and resolve, that glowing sense of high adventure and high purpose—should strengthen us all as we face our own crisis of confidence today.

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