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FDR & The Public

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Dylan K. Haney

FDR & The Public

HIST4873 Topical Seminar: The World at War

Dr. Bethany Hicks

12/18/14

Introduction

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a key player domestically, internationally, and diplomatically within the conflict of World War II. Not only was his leadership essential in carrying the United States through one of the most tumultuous times in its history, but also in working with other leaders across the globe during the war, ultimately securing victory and subsequently placing the United States as the major superpower in the world.

With regard to FDR it is important to consider that his international meetings and conferences, addresses at home, and overall handling of World War II as President of the United States are noteworthy during this time. Alas, it is during the most difficult and trying times as a nation that leadership abilities are properly tested and ultimately exhibited, and such abilities are worth extensive consideration, particularly considering the outcome of World War II.

With that in mind, President Roosevelt used a variety of what some may consider unconventional, unorthodox, or what some even describe as downright manipulative tactics in terms of how he sought to shape and sell policies and conference decisions to the American public. Furthermore, his personal correspondence, debate, and discussions behind closed doors transformed into a message that was made palatable for the American Public by such means. Media was a central factor with his relationship with the public, and he, in many ways, took advantage of such. Because of its importance historically, as the radio came of age at this time, this invention became an increasingly important avenue for politicians to navigate successfully, being able to reach masses of people at any given moment. This is just one of many examples of how FDR conveyed his message to the public. Ultimately, President Franklin D. Roosevelt served in a time of great crisis for our nation, and his leadership skills during this time were

crucial to the success (or failure) of the Allied forces. His success in the area of *public communication* is therefore worth due consideration.

Historiography/Literature Review

Franklin D. Roosevelt ranks among the most historically discussed, analyzed, and written about Presidents in history of the United States, and certainly the twentieth century. Opinions on various aspects of his Presidency are mixed among scholars, but most historians regard his effectiveness as a leader to be among the greatest, perhaps even ranking right behind Abraham Lincoln. There are endless books, articles, commentaries, films, newspapers, and the like covering FDR and his Presidency, but the analytical aspect of specific ways he handled the office are much more rare. The latter sources prove most useful in this discourse, and are the basis upon which the entire thesis rests. They adequately provide proper historical background, as well as framework for analysis of FDR and his dealings with the public and public sentiment as a whole.

Historical Context

In considering FDR's effectiveness in communicating with the public in a variety of ways, it is equally as important first to understand the historical context in which this was accomplished. December 7, 1941, the day *that will live in infamy*, is certainly pivotal in understanding what led the United States and FDR to enter World War II. But in reality, "The actual path to war for the United States was long and complex. It began with the peace settlements that following the First World War, agreements that created a renewed structure of alliances and ententes by which the victors hoped to preserve the status quo."¹ The problems flared up due to the fact that many of these countries across the globe had differing ideas regarding what exactly the *status quo* was at the time, with countries having varying ambitions

¹ Kimball, Warren. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 83-99. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552565>.

conflicting with such status. Warren Kimball writes in his analysis of FDR and his role in World War II, “British and French elites each had their own similar yet differing versions, with both nations focused on maintaining their colonial empire. The United States, with its powerful and expanding economy, held to somewhat of a different vision.”² A vision articulated carefully by Franklin Roosevelt later on.

Then the Great Depression hit in the 1930’s, which brought along with it the “rise of the dictators” in various international stages. This particular set of changes in status made Europe and the United States vulnerable. The Great Depression is important to consider within the historical background because of FDR’s role in easing the tensions at home. This was an immensely scary time for the United States, with instability and uncertainty of power abroad coupled with a floundering economy at home. Much of FDR’s suave nature as a communicator and his ability to influence public opinion came about at this time, most notably with the beginning of his occasional *Fireside Chat*, the very first, non-coincidentally being the one to ease tensions over the recent banking crisis and financial collapse, known as the *Fireside Chat on Banking*.³ An important note about this time that Kimball makes in his analysis is that, “No nation was less prepared psychologically for the maneuvering and bargaining that had traditionally constituted international diplomacy and war avoidance (certainly not peacekeeping),

² Kimball, Warren. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 83-99. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552565>.

³ "American Rhetoric: Franklin Delano Roosevelt - First Fireside Chat ("The Banking Crisis")." American Rhetoric: Franklin Delano Roosevelt - First Fireside Chat ("The Banking Crisis"). March 12, 1933. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrfirstfiresidechat.html>.

despite the best efforts of Theodore Roosevelt to begin the education process.”⁴ Perhaps it was FDR’s task to pick up where his distant relative left off in terms of *educating* the public.

With all of the uncertainty at home and abroad, it was important to keep in mind that American involvement was initially intended to be quite limited. The problem became that, “American prosperity and hence security depended upon a world, particularly a European and East Asian world, where the United States could conduct commerce without what is called ‘artificial’ trade restraints.”⁵ But alas, this was not entirely possible considering the “rise of the dictators.” Global instability, the Nazis, American discomfort with what was going on in Europe in terms of persecution, and similar factors contributed to the alternating stance of the nation’s President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

After much of this had developed across the globe, FDR moved to neutrality, favoring of course the Allied forces. Furthermore, at this juncture prior to the *date of infamy*, he avoided answering yes or no to questions about direct U.S. involvement in World War II (parallels could be drawn to politics in the modern era as well). Roosevelt eventually agreed to a destroyer-bases deal with Winston Churchill in Great Britain (See *Source Analysis* for details and significance of their correspondence), and was called upon for aid several times in this capacity. The public was somewhat wary of this, because they wondered if it put the United States closer to direct involvement in the war. Also of great importance is the fact that FDR expanded the office of the President by making such agreements, and with that naturally questions begin to arise in the general population. Following the election of 1940, a pivotal election and turning point in terms

⁴ Kimball, Warren. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 83-99. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552565>.

⁵ Kimball, Warren. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 83-99. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552565>.

of intensity of Roosevelt's public influence, he received yet another letter from Churchill. Out of this letter came the Lend-Lease Act in March of 1941, which again greatly expanded the office of President.⁶ He had no choice but to go to the public, but as it turns out that took care of a lot of the conflict.

In 1941, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, and what followed was a lively debate in the chambers and abroad about the Lend-Lease Agreement and to whom it would be extended. Tensions rose with the Japanese after the German attack on the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 was the tipping point. Immediately following these events, FDR requests publicly before Congress, a formal declaration of war.

Source Analysis

Typically, the more time that passes from the end of Presidency, the clearer the picture of the administration becomes historically. The sources that were utilized to support this particular thesis apply nicely in that primary documents including photographs, correspondence between FDR and other international leaders, audio clips of radio addresses and press events, and similar correspondence between the President and the public exists in great condition. With these sources certain conclusions can be drawn, as outlined in the next portion of the discourse. Furthermore, such assertions are corroborated and expanded on in a credible manner by the usage of a variety of secondary sources from noted Presidential scholars in more modern times, whose works have been used in collegiate settings across the nation, and in this case printed in noted academic journals. Therefore, original content is explored, as well as modern thought today, providing a more thorough analysis.

⁶ Kimball, Warren. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 83-99. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552565>.

Detailed primary source correspondence⁷ (See *Appendix*) between Franklin Roosevelt and international leaders, particularly Winston Churchill outlined the need for the United States to aid Great Britain. Out of this correspondence came the destroyer-bases agreement, the Lend-Lease Act, as well as additional aid agreements in a variety of forms. One of the first pieces of correspondence from Churchill to the President read, “If necessary, we shall continue the war alone and we are not afraid of that. But I trust you realize, Mr. President, that the voice and force of the United States may count for nothing if they are withheld too long.” The letter aimed to get President Roosevelt to join in with Britain and help, in not so much a boots on the ground fashion but more of an arms aid, so to speak. Churchill aimed to impress upon the President the imminent need for the U.S. to aid its ally, and what was at stake globally should it refuse to do so. Churchill assumed, in writing this letter, that the United States is committed to the same type of values that Britain is, and is thus seeking its help. In order to ensure international tranquility and to defeat Britain, it is absolutely necessary for the United States to aid Britain, Churchill argued. People of a war-weary country would be skeptical of such requests and approach it with caution. The public’s disposition towards international interference (largely isolationism prior to Pearl Harbor) is key to consider at this time and when FDR’s communication skills came into play.

Radio addresses from the time provide a great deal of insight into the rhetoric that FDR used to convey in his messages to the public. One such example of a primary source utilized for consideration is that of *A Call for Sacrifice* delivered in April of 1942. According to the Modern History Sourcebook, “The speech indicates the tremendous increase in governmental power, and

⁷ Winston Churchill, *Letter to Franklin Roosevelt*, (*National Archives*, 12/7/1940)
<http://docsteach.org/documents/194812/detail?menu=closed&mode=search&sortBy=relevance&q=franklin+roosevelt&commit=Go&page=3>

control over the economy, needed to fight the war.”⁸ Some fundamental changes needed to be made within the country and especially with regards to how the government functioned overall, to deal with the international war, and FDR took to the public to make his (ultimately successful) case. By using blatant honesty, simplicity (ease of language and diction), and personal stories, the President aims to influence the public into joining the sacrifice, to which he refers numerous times throughout his address. Sources such as these provide that type of insight into FDR. The intended audience of the text is the American public at large, and arguably particularly those who are skeptical of his increase in government power, the war overall, and essentially those who are being forced to sacrifice some way of life. He aims to calmly provide a clarity to these ultimately complex and tough decisions to maintain social and economic stability in the country.

Synthesis

The skepticism of the United States in terms of intervention was notable. Kimball writes, “The conundrum that Americans’ faced was what historian Lloyd Garner so perceptively labeled the ‘covenant with power.’ Using power, especially military power, to achieve political goals was distasteful, perhaps even immoral...Hitler Mussolini, and the Japanese had no compunctions about using military force to achieve their goals.”

Isolationism permeated American culture at the time, and as the historical background information mentioned it was a hard time economically, and the last thing Americans wanted was war. Given the situation abroad the president had to reach the public effectively somehow. He wanted and ultimately needed the public backing during a divisive time in American history. President Roosevelt used what many would consider unconventional means, many which are

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “*A Call for Sacrifice*”, 28 April, 1942 (*Modern History Sourcebook*, 1998).

surprising, to be in tune with the public sentiment, react accordingly, and get certain messages conveyed to the public to further his agenda.

Matthew Baum and Samuel Kernell write in their analysis of *Economic Class and Popular Support for Franklin Roosevelt in War and Peace* that, “Until Pearl Harbor, partisan and ideological conflict never receded far from the nation’s civic life, and whenever it flared up, Roosevelt found himself at the center of the controversy...against this backdrop of partisan strife and eroding base, Roosevelt gingerly began cultivating the public’s support for aid to Britain in its war against Germany.”⁹ Furthermore, they argue, “Public support appears in all accounts to have been critical to Roosevelt’s success.” There are several explanations as to why this was the case.

The first notable way that Roosevelt dealt with public opinion is the use of what he referred to as, simply, *spies*. Roosevelt wanted, most rudimentarily, to know what the public thought about the job he was doing, the direction the nation was headed, response to discussions about war, and things like this. He wanted to be in tune with the public. These spies helped him accomplish this goal. Baum and Kernell write, “He enlisted ‘spies’ (his expression) around the country who updated him with the anecdotal reports on the views of ordinary citizens.”¹⁰

Polling data was also important, and many historians consider FDR the first President to rely heavily on results of such. Again Kernell and Baum address this, “Presaging the voracious appetite of modern presidents for polling data, FDR carefully studied whatever published and private poll reports he could obtain. During the war he encouraged privately commissioned

⁹ Baum, Matthew, and Samuel Kernell. "Economic Class and Popular Support for Franklin Roosevelt in War and Peace." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2001): 198-229. Accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3078802>.

¹⁰ Baum, Matthew, and Samuel Kernell. "Economic Class and Popular Support for Franklin Roosevelt in War and Peace." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2001): 198-229. Accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3078802>.

opinion surveys and eagerly received confidential briefings on the results.”¹¹ After checking the validity of such claims, the proof of such measures taken by the President are housed at the Roosevelt Library, which include files and detailed correspondence between him and his aides at the time.

The use of the media was perhaps the most instrumental factor in FDR’s success in reaching the public at large. As mentioned previously, the *Fireside Chats* were invented to coincide with the advent of the radio age, beginning with FDR as a response to the Banking Crisis of the mid-thirties. Richard Steele, in his journal entry *Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Foreign Policy Critics* discusses his use of radio in depth, “Roosevelt found in radio an effective and more malleable alternative to the press. As he told one publisher in 1940, his problems in getting ‘factual’ news to the American people had obliged him ‘to resort to other media in order to give the people of the country the facts they are entitled to.’”¹² Baum and Kernell assert much the same and even discuss the importance of Press Conferences, “The president kept the public and, in turn, Congress attuned to his policy agenda with his famous fireside chats...In 998 press conferences, Roosevelt offered correspondents hard news, in return for which they general provided him and his policies with favorable coverage.”¹³ Primary documents, including those of FDR pictured surrounded at his desk by members of the media and the press, indicate how he

¹¹ Baum, Matthew, and Samuel Kernell. "Economic Class and Popular Support for Franklin Roosevelt in War and Peace." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2001): 198-229. Accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3078802>.

¹² Steele, Richard. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Foreign Policy Critics." *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (1979): 15-32. Accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2150153>.

¹³ Baum, Matthew, and Samuel Kernell. "Economic Class and Popular Support for Franklin Roosevelt in War and Peace." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2001): 198-229. Accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3078802>.

dominated the agenda in terms of media influence. He was able to control the message, a message he wanted out there to gain support for his causes.

In any historical consideration it is important to consider critics, and sometimes some hard realities. Some historians have asserted that FDR's tactics with the media were rough, sometimes unnecessarily difficult, and shrewd even to a fault in some cases. Steele also asserts in his piece, "The president...provided the press and public with as little food for controversy as he could...the same spirit produced a presidential order banning travel by publishers to Russia, China, India, and the battlefronts."¹⁴ FDR ultimately sought unification over the war efforts; he wanted to eliminate division using the aforementioned tactics, albeit controversial in many respects. If a member of the press had a problem or disagreed, he wanted to know why, and was probably going to figure it out.

Conclusion

President Franklin Roosevelt's concluding words in his first *Fireside Chat* in 1933 mentioned previously were, "It is your problem, my friends, your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail." Such rhetoric characterized FDR, and his relationship with the people. However his tactics with the public are regarded historically, one thing is certain, they were certainly effective. The history behind World War II and the role that the United States played was crucial, but so was FDR's leadership style in terms of garnering public support. Primary sources such as speeches that were delivered at the time, correspondence between leaders, and existing documents outlining certain agreements all synthesize to create a picture of FDR as he worked with the very people he was elected to represent, those of the United States, through

¹⁴ Steele, Richard. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Foreign Policy Critics." *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (1979): 15-32. Accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2150153>.

what is regarded historically as one of the toughest times, but also where the United States emerged the greatest in the world.

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Appendix

"American Rhetoric: Franklin Delano Roosevelt - First Fireside Chat ("The Banking Crisis")."
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