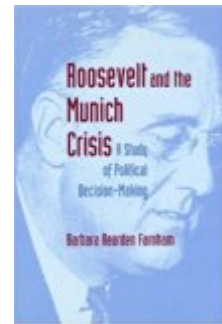




Barbara Rearden Farnham. *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study of Political Decision-Making*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xi + 313 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02611-4.

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Unravelling Roosevelt

Scan American history for its most intriguing and influential people, then search for the most pivotal events, significant issues, and revolutionary eras. Consider a time when all these factors converged. Surely one would be Franklin D. Roosevelt's foreign policy regarding the Munich Crisis of 1938, as the world headed toward war. That is the subject of Barbara Farnham's masterful mixing of history and political science theory, a careful and, above all, shrewd study of the decisions taken by one of this century's most notable figures.

Historians, particularly those who research in American foreign policy, have wrestled with Roosevelt for decades. On the topic of dealing with the European dictators, he has been called a vacillating and cautious appeaser, a brilliant tactician who pushed the limits of isolationism, a skilled and manipulative juggler of contradictory aims, and an opportunistic, drifting leader buffeted by powerful forces of the times. Farnham, of Columbia University's Institute of War and Peace Studies, ambitiously enters the fray with an original contribution that portrays an FDR with even more complexities than these interpretations allow.

She agrees that Roosevelt was a political animal, then goes much, much further. FDR, Farnham argues, understood foreign and domestic realities. He learned on the job, keeping his options open. He adapted his policies to obtain national interests as crisis whirled around him. Roosevelt was flexible, but also tough and determined. His leadership in a democracy torn between intervention

and isolationism, in such a tumultuous time, was simply exemplary.

The context is the Munich Crisis of 1938, when Adolph Hitler threatened war if part of Czechoslovakia was not ceded to Germany. To Farnham, the crisis was the turning point in Roosevelt's prewar foreign policy. He converted from an ambivalent approach toward appeasement to a focused effort to aid the democracies. The Munich sellout convinced him that Hitler was bent on domination, and thus menaced American security. Aid stopped short of intervention, however, so that Roosevelt could cover his vulnerable political flank in an isolationist-run Congress.

Ambiguity, contradiction, puzzles—all three characterize FDR's policies. But he knew what he wanted—to stop Hitler—and would learn along the way the means to go about doing so, all the while under severe constraints at home and abroad. Roosevelt played at many levels, a fact that Farnham correctly believes provides fertile ground for the application of decision-making theory.

Her task is to dispose of three such theories (analytical, intuitive, and motivational) and then put forth her own model: the political approach to decision-making. Its gist is that Roosevelt's decisions stemmed from the need to reconcile, not privilege, the competing objectives of foreign policy and its constituent groups. That is, he did not seek to trade off some interests to win others, but instead weaved together apparently contradictory aims to accommodate as many as possible. In this way, he

found a policy acceptable to him and his opposition, and built a consensus around it so he could carry out his aims. In this case, the president blended “values” of peace with those of security, and ultimately forged a foreign policy toward Europe that satisfied his desire to help friends to the fullest extent possible while managing isolationists at home.

Roosevelt kept America out of war but prevented a total German conquest. Explaining how he did so is Farnham’s mission, at which she admirably succeeds in five chapters on Roosevelt’s shifting views, prescriptions, and actions. Her treatment is neither the standard fare of political science (sometimes overburdened with abstract theory) nor of history narrative (which occasionally shuns useful theoretical concepts from the social sciences). Instead, she blends theory and history, with extensive investigation of archival sources and secondary literature, in what is a model of interdisciplinary—and readable—research. This permits her to respond both to theoretical competitors in her own field and historians who have long debated Roosevelt and appeasement. Her take is nuanced; her scrutiny of FDR truly opens up new paths on well-trampled ground.

In sum, her interpretation shows that Roosevelt learned. He was a liberal realist, to be sure, but he had no fixed ideas on how to deal with Hitler. A well-known experimenter in domestic affairs, FDR did the same in the global arena, balancing internationalist and isolationist values.

Before Munich, FDR could not figure out Hitler. Such uncertainty led to improvisational warning shots, like the Quarantine Speech of October 1937, designed to head off the dictators (Mussolini included) and educate domestic opinion about the dangers of fascism. He dropped the quarantine idea in the face of domestic realities, but he worried increasingly about appeasement. This was not vacillation, as some might conclude, rather it was “purposeful maneuvering” (p. 84) in the search for a diagnosis of Hitler’s intentions.

Roosevelt moved into action during the Munich Crisis itself. Detailing the negotiations, Farnham explains that Roosevelt was disgusted both by fascism and appeasement. But convinced that the standoff would result in war, he eventually intervened with an appeal for moderation after the Fuhrer issued his ultimatum concerning the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Still, FDR refused to amend the isolationist neutrality law or carry out a blockade, wary of the domestic risks. Instead, his approach was more nuanced.

He labored to undercut the appeasement policy although he would not act until Hitler had clearly shown himself to be solely responsible for the war scare. What turned Roosevelt was, incredibly, a factor that historians seem to have overlooked. FDR was piqued emotionally; Hitler would simply not play fair and Roosevelt was alarmed. Thus, he suddenly changed his mood, toward favoring intervention, and sent his messages to Hitler. Domestic politics did not drive his policy. Rather, a deep fear of Nazism did.

After the Munich Crisis, Roosevelt adopted a new policy of concrete intervention. Evaluating what he had learned once the emotional tension of the Crisis had subsided, he recognized that Hitler was a danger. Contrary to critics who accuse him of continuing appeasement, FDR was not at all satisfied with the outcome in Munich. The European balance of power was now weighted in Germany’s favor, and that was a threat to U.S. security. Thus, planning ensued to counter German power with American air power and to protect Latin America. In short, on the eve of world war, by 1939, Roosevelt abandoned the hope that Hitler could be dealt with in a cooperative framework. This was confirmed when Germany marched into Prague in March, but Munich had presented him beforehand with the “conclusive evidence that Hitler lacked all respect for the processes of political accommodation” (p. 171), writes Farnham. Munich was the catalyst for change in Roosevelt’s foreign policy.

FDR’s plans were acceptable to isolationists and his own desire to intervene. He accommodated when needed; political expediency came natural to him. But he also learned, as he gradually came to recognize the Nazi menace, that the constraint of isolationism had to be overcome. Farnham’s message is clear: decision-makers have to compromise in the face of resistance, but they do not give in or orchestrate *quid pro quos*. Instead, they try to satisfy multiple interests—which is what Roosevelt did.

The interest most damaging to his cause of aiding the democracies was isolationism (Farnham might have elaborated on its strength more than she did), which prevailed in Congress. By turning aside provocative interventionist policies and nagging demands on Congress (to revise the neutrality acts or begin a massive rearmament program), Roosevelt educated the public to the necessity of helping the Europeans without upsetting the American sensibility toward isolation.

Aiding the democracies by an expansion of air power, which would warn off Hitler, defend the hemisphere, and

provide military aid to the Europeans, would soothe the isolationists by stopping short of war. Once convinced of the likelihood of war after the Nazis seized Czechoslovakia, and only then, Roosevelt campaigned vigorously, but to no avail, for a repeal of the arms embargo. He threw all his chips on the table out of the conviction that Britain and France were now in great jeopardy.

The decision was political, taken in the context of domestic and foreign calculations. Roosevelt still did not choose rearmament because he knew that Americans were not ready if Hitler called the bluff and forced the United States to war. Yet he acted; domestic constraints did not paralyze him. Isolationists were alarmed, but so were interventionists who wanted more. FDR chose a “transcendent solution” that gave each a modicum of satisfaction. In doing so, he bought time to teach the public about the dire situation, without unduly scaring them.

Roosevelt did what needed to be done, and that is a simple fact that historians often slight. FDR reacted to the circumstances of the moment while he planned for the future. Aiding the democracies “was the one policy that would work both substantively and politically, in the long run as well as the short” (p. 223), wisely concluded Farnham. This was astute, and once could say, even dazzling statesmanship.

Had Roosevelt chosen the right course? Farnham believes so, and her argument is compelling. Other options, such as disarmament or isolation, were unacceptable on strategic grounds. Bold alternatives—blockade or war—were unsuitable in the congressional climate. Besides, the United States had insufficient arms to offer. Thus, FDR’s approach of “attempting to keep America out by keeping the Allies in” smacks of the prudence that comes with expert leadership, learned in the heat of battle. Deep-rooted values like isolationism could not be overcome so easily. Roosevelt had to make decisions that were acceptable at home, and aid to the democracies was the answer.

Such temporizing may be irritating, as it is in current affairs when politicians seemingly govern by reading opinion polls. But FDR got what he wanted in a particularly difficult era over an especially divisive issue. In a democracy, this is proof of political mastery. Farnham has deciphered this complicated man. Roosevelt, perhaps, did not do the right thing (although I think he did), but he certainly did the only acceptable thing. And that is why he is such a significant figure in history.

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