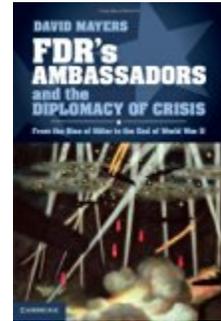


David Mayers. *FDR's Ambassadors and the Diplomacy of Crisis: From the Rise of Hitler to the End of World War II*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 384 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-03126-5.

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## Liquidate the Diplomats

“Bring on the machine guns,” Joseph Stalin once joked at a bibulous Kremlin banquet during World War II. “Let’s liquidate the diplomats” (p. 248). As David Mayers demonstrates in this masterful study, President Franklin D. Roosevelt may have occasionally harbored similar sentiments about his own team of ambassadors during the 1930s and 1940s. Determined to be his own secretary of state and viewing most professional diplomats as striped pants purveyors of protocol, FDR rarely gave his diplomats in foreign capitals the scrutiny and respect they deserved. Instead the president preferred ad hoc personal envoys like Harry Hopkins and eventually relied on summit meetings to shape foreign policy. Even though he invited his ambassadors to correspond with him directly (and sometimes with intimate jocularity), he actually selected his diplomatic representatives more by whimsical instinct than careful calculation. Some Rooseveltian ambassadors performed admirably, others bumbled along competently, and at least two were unmitigated disasters for whom the president had only himself to blame.

Although Mayers does not rank them explicitly, the worst ambassadorial choice inflicted his most egregious damage after FDR’s death. “I wish I had more men like Pat,” mused Roosevelt as he sent the rambunctious Oklahoma Republican Patrick J. Hurley to China in autumn 1944 to patch up differences between General Joseph W. Stilwell and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (p. 110). After recommending Stilwell’s replacement as theater com-

mander, the flamboyant Hurley wangled his own appointment as ambassador in place of the “capable but ignored” professional Clarence Gauss (p. 97). Subsequently, at FDR’s behest, Hurley busied himself with the near impossible task of forging national unity between Chiang’s Nationalists and Mao Zedong’s Communists—the latter of whom Hurley mistakenly characterized as merely a collection of “agrarian reformers” (p. 115). Plagued by “vain imaginings,” the ambassador bullied and censored the professional foreign service officers serving under him, alienated the Communists with his Choctaw war whoops and pro-Chiang bias, and made himself a public spectacle at a Sino-American banquet when he drunkenly confused the journalist Annalee Jacoby for his wife and “cooed over her while loudly reminiscing about their wedding night” (pp. 112, 118). Nonetheless, Hurley’s most devastating disservice came with his resignation in November 1945 when he flung malicious charges at seven “disloyal” China hands who had allegedly “sided with the Chinese Communist armed party and the imperialist bloc of nations ... to keep China divided against herself” (p. 118). These “earnest men,” as Mayers calls them, were subsequently removed from their posts and became the first victims of McCarthyism. Their dismissal “demoralized the Foreign Service and denied to future policy-makers the benefit” of their accumulated expertise (p. 121).

Roosevelt may have thought it “the greatest joke in the world” to appoint a red-headed Irish American,

Joseph P. Kennedy, to the Court of St. James's in 1937, but the former "bootlegger" and Hollywood mogul nearly destroyed the Anglo-American special relationship before it began (p. 178). Although Kennedy's endorsement for appeasing Germany made for a compatible fit with Neville Chamberlain's government at least until the Munich Conference, his outspoken defeatism and perceived "cravenness" rendered him obnoxious to the British once war began in September 1939 (p. 186). A notorious philanderer who reportedly "couldn't keep his mouth shut or his pants on," the inept ambassador arrogantly lectured Winston Churchill that the United States would not be left "holding the bag for a war in which the Allies expect to be beaten" (pp. 185, 186). Instead of recalling Kennedy during the 1940 presidential campaign and risking his defection to the isolationists, FDR finessed the situation by negotiating the Destroyers-Bases Agreement without ambassadorial input and then sending a stream of special emissaries (William J. Donovan, Harry Hopkins, Wendell Willkie, and Averell Harriman) to reassure Churchill until he could appoint Republican John G. Winant as the new ambassador in early 1941. In contrast to Kennedy, the shaggy-haired Winant quickly endeared himself to Britons by "darting through rubble-strewn London Streets ... to help blitz victims or douse fires caused by incendiary bombs" (p. 191). Thereafter, despite Winant's competence and popularity, the president kept wartime relations with Britain largely in his own hands—through summitry with Churchill and through the Combined Chiefs of Staff and the British Embassy in Washington.

Another disappointing diplomat for FDR was his erstwhile favorite, William C. Bullitt. Despite a sour experience as the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union (1933-36), once in Paris this former Philadelphia journalist inundated the White House with chummy insider gossip, occasionally titillating Roosevelt's fascination for "prurient matters" by describing the "dueling mistresses" of rival French premiers (p. 137). "Bullitt practically sleeps with the French Cabinet," chortled Interior Secretary Harold Ickes (p. 132). Unlike Kennedy, Bullitt rejected appeasement after Munich, but he subsequently painted a too "roseate picture" of French resilience once war began, even going so far as to demand U.S. belligerency in the frantic days prior to France's capitulation in June 1940 (p. 133). Despite FDR's improvised efforts to rush planes and other war materials to England and France, his envoy upbraided him for falling short at a portentous juncture when "a great nation and a great president could simply talk" (p. 136). On returning

home, Bullitt further antagonized his boss by orchestrating a vendetta against Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles and also by romancing and jilting White House secretary Marguerite "Missy" Lehand. Thereafter Roosevelt kept Bullitt dangling by promising important jobs that never quite materialized. The discredited diplomat avenged himself after the war by claiming that, despite his own personal warnings, Stalin had "bamboozled" FDR into surrendering Eastern Europe to Communist domination (p. 139). For Mayers, however, Bullitt's worst sin may have been his recommendation to Washington to keep an "especially vigilant eye on the Jewish refugees from Germany" lest Fifth Columnists and spies create havoc (p. 139). It was a message that Bullitt's fellow ambassador to Italy, Breckinridge Long, took to heart as assistant secretary of state in charge of refugees after 1939, thereby reinforcing already rigid bureaucratic rules and quotas against victims of the Holocaust. Mayers also berates Bullitt for denigrating the abilities of consular official Hiram Bingham in Marseilles whose heroic efforts on behalf of Jewish refugees went unrecognized until 2002 when he posthumously received the Constructive Dissent Award for "putting humanity before his career" (p. 169).

Despite FDR's penchant for political appointees, potentially the most successful of all his ambassadors was a professional holdover from President Herbert Hoover's administration, Joseph C. Grew. Partly because of their shared Groton-Harvard ties, Roosevelt kept the amiable career diplomat at his Tokyo post, paid attention to his evolving analysis of Japanese politics, and nearly accepted ambassadorial advice that might have derailed Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The occasion was the abortive Konoye-Roosevelt summit meeting proposed for Juneau or Honolulu in early autumn 1941. As Grew saw it, only such a meeting could break the deadlocked negotiations between the two countries. Japan's prime minister "means business and will go as far as possible ... to reach a reasonable understanding," he assured FDR, urging him to undertake "an act of the highest statesmanship" (p. 26). Captivated at first, the president allowed himself to be dissuaded by hard-liners in the State Department who insisted on concrete preliminary agreements prior to any summit. Grew and his able assistant Eugene Dooman had "gone native," they said, and lacked their access to intercepted Japanese cables that indicated Japanese duplicity (p. 28). Whether such a conference would have prevented or delayed war, admittedly "a matter of conjecture," Mayers nonetheless commends Grew's retrospective judgment that had the president

been “more alert” he might have “mustered the imagination and means to avert war with Japan, thereby allowing a less distracted United States to confront Germany head on” after 1941 (pp. 30, 250).

Mayers also offers colorful and incisive analysis of more than a dozen other American envoys, even commenting on contributions from their families. For example, Ambassador William Dodd in Berlin was ill-served by the sexual adventures of his daughter Martha, which further estranged the hapless Dodd from his professional staff and invited unwanted attention from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Similarly, Joe Kennedy’s military attaché considered the ambassador’s eldest son and namesake a “smart aleck,” further evidence of the father’s deficient character (p. 257). In contrast, Kathleen Harriman’s practiced skills as a hostess for her father’s embassy in Moscow “won respect” from the diplomatic corps and helped to humanize the aloof and aristocratic Averell Harriman (p. 232). So too did Alice Perry Grew’s Japanese language facility make this descendant of Commodore Matthew Perry an invaluable helpmate to her partly deaf husband in Tokyo.

As the author of several quality books on U.S.-Soviet relations, Mayers is especially effective in depicting the cramped, suspicious atmosphere and cumulative indignities inflicted on visiting diplomats in wartime Russia. One can sympathize with the frustrations that prompted Ambassador Laurence Steinhardt to explode at a deputy commissar—tell him “if my toilet isn’t working in one hour, I’m going up there and use his” (p. 220). Given FDR’s disappointment with both amateur and career diplomats (“I have had about as much luck with one set as with the other”), even his recruitment of two admirals from his beloved navy brought inconclusive results (p. 256). The “unsentimental and prudish” William D. Leahy ran his embassy like “a ship’s skipper” and successfully carried out Roosevelt’s so-called Vichy gamble by encouraging Marshal Henri Petain’s government to keep

the French fleet out of German hands and by preparing the way for the successful Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 (p. 144). Yet William H. Standley’s “elephantine clumsiness” and constant complaints about Soviet ingratitude during his sixteen months in the USSR (1942-43) elicited only a classic put-down from Kremlin authorities: “We’ve lost millions of people, and they want us to crawl on our knees because they send us spam” (pp. 228, 251).

How essential were FDR’s diplomats, with their attachment to nonviolent norms, to winning a world war that inflicted tens of millions of deaths and ended in mushroom clouds over Japan? Mayers is careful not to claim too much. Both war and peace, he writes, expose the “fragility, ambiguities, and enduring legacies of diplomacy” (p. 7). He recognizes the inherent limitations of these Ivy League members of “a pretty good club” as unprepared for “the age of blistering locomotion, flashing steel, belching petroleum, industrialized murder, mass mobilization, or state idolatry” (p. 252). The political appointees were similarly blinkered. Yet Mayers also stresses that the president, “confident that things would somehow come ultimately right, frequently let matters drift,” thereby allowing his ambassadors “significant margins of leeway” (p. 254). These emissaries mattered more than the boss realized. In their efforts to “divine Roosevelt’s elusive mind” and to add to “the sum of diplomacy’s moderating purpose,” several of “America’s ambassadors acquitted themselves well” (p. 6). In an eloquent conclusion, Mayers pays tribute to an idealized “generic ambassador”—perhaps a combination of Harriman and Grew—who in “helping the captain to navigate the ship of state and keep it afloat, must know that the sea upon which it rides is of obscure origin, the ultimate destination indistinct, and a safe haven only a respite from cascading perils” (p. 259). Thus for good reason we should not execute our indispensable diplomats especially in wartime.

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