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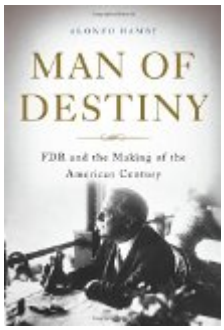
Alonzo L. Hamby. *Man of Destiny: FDR and the Making of the American Century.* New York: Basic Books, 2015. 512 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-02860-3.



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Alonzo Hamby has written a splendid biography of one of America's most famous presidents. It is a very conventional work, making no concessions of any kind to fashions in historiography or publishing. People of leisure will enjoy its company on their extended cruises, during their winter sojourns in Florida, or when spare time is forced upon them by judges and juries, as was the case with Roosevelt's previous biographer, Conrad Black. No special gift except persistence is required to master the great flow of Hamby's pages. What we get from Hamby are weekly, at times daily, accounts of Roosevelt's extraordinary range of actions and encounters, full of people, projects, life, and color. From the twenty-four hours of his mother's labor pains to the bishop's brief euology at his funeral, nothing is missing.

The Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to Franklin D. Roosevelt*, of 2011, informs us that there are at least eighty biographies of the thirty-second president, and a "staggering number" of other studies. Alongside the historians, journalists, relatives, and associates have all contributed to the flood, often massively.[1] So why yet another? With serious works on Harry Truman and the Roosevelt of the 1930s behind him, perhaps it was inevitable that Hamby would wish to try his own full-length study of FDR. But as long as one keeps in mind that this is a general-purpose volume, and not one intended to further the historiographical debate, then the book can be read on its own terms. If it succeeds in bringing some of the fruits of decades of scholarship, including the author's own, to the attention of a broad public, so much the better. Full-time historians of the man and his period will note some of its limits.

Man of Destiny unwittingly confirms that Roosevelt was moved principally by his own impressions and convictions rather than by a deep reflection on the crises of the times. Roosevelt talked a great deal, gave innumerable speeches, yet never provided serious explanations for the Great Depression, how a second world war had come so quickly after the first, or what role America would play in the world after the war. Yet Roosevelt was surrounded by people who thought

and talked about these questions continuously, in the media, in universities, in think tanks, in and around government, and in every kind of public place. William J. Barber puts it well on the first page of his book ***Designs within Disorder: Franklin D.Roosevelt, the Economists, and the Shaping of American Economic Policy, 1933-1945***: "He never claimed standing as a producer of economic ideas. Instead he saw himself as their consumer and, on these matters, he was an uncompromising champion of consumer sovereignty."[2]

When Hamby talks of the "man of destiny" he is referring evidently to Roosevelt's profound faith in his nation's mission to reform the world and lead it to a better place. So it is regrettable that the key to this revolution--universalizing America's experience of the link between economic progress and democratic stability--should get such scarce attention in the book. All the plans he launched for America and the postwar world possessed a fundamental economic dimension, which is quite missing here.[3]

Like many interpreters of Roosevelt, Hamby seems to have been enthralled by his subject's limitless talent for guile and dissimulation. There is indeed a paradox in the distance between the simplicity of the rhetoric Roosevelt deployed to give orders and explain what he was doing, and the complexity of the results. In the New Deal he trusted exceptional men (almost always men) to bridge the gap and make his invented agencies work. Sometimes they succeeded; quite often they did not, as Hamby explains in some detail. But it is too simple to say that Roosevelt's foreign policy always sought to reconcile Theodore Roosevelt's realism with Woodrow Wilson's idealism (pp. 83, 323, 326, 343). In wartime, he chose a very specific tool to realize his dream of a rebuilt world system: the grand international conference. Roosevelt apparently declared at one point in 1943: "We must do something about world agriculture."[4] Months later the Hot Springs Agriculture Conference happened, with thirty-eight nations present. As a result the League of Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation was reborn. There were eight such conferences, all of which produced grand, enduring institutional innovations. Hamby mentions only Dumbarton Oaks, very briefly.

Reticent on his thought, Hamby is not shy to pass judgment on Roosevelt's actions, especially during the New Deal phase, and often finds them wanting. But it comes as no surprise to know that the man was temperamental, unscrupulous, devious, and manipulative, especially when his initiatives backfired. All politicians in power must deploy this kind of behavior, and they will not only be forgiven but lauded if their maneuvers are considered successful. In the New Deal Roosevelt adopted an approach which was "experimental and somewhat concealed," according to Henry Wallace (p. 215), and the results--documented here once more--were contradictory, to say the least. In contrast we can say that the method worked in the case of the semi-clandestine help the president gave to Britain and France during the 1939-41 neutrality phase. Hamby implies that Roosevelt was a better wartime leader than he had been during the Great Depression, and "displayed an astute grasp of grand strategy beyond the capabilities of his generals and admirals" (p. 435).

Behind this judgment lies a conventional account of the geopolitics of the war, with the usual suspects on parade in the usual way, but accompanied in Roosevelt's case by extra details on his entourage, his means of travel, and the places he stayed. The president is always at the center: whether the author is mentioning cabinet members, senior officers of the armed services, his cronies in and out of government, or others, they all come across as mere supporting actors, which is very much what FDR wanted them to be. From this perspective, foreigners get very short shrift, and there is nothing to learn about the Winston Churchill relationship, or on Roosevelt's hopeless-

ly superficial estimate of his influence over Joseph Stalin. General de Gaulle barely appears--a pity as he had interesting things to say in his memoirs about the president's ambitions and world view.

This is indeed a very Americo-centric book, clearly designed for the home front. Apart from a few British references, all of the sources are American, whether they be memoirs, diaries, newspapers--copious use is made of the ***New York Times***--or secondary works by historians. In this the text simply reflects the man and his times. It was a limit of the wartime New Deal that it took almost no account at all of what other nations might think of the great plans for reforming the world, and even when the British government and press expressed deep misgivings--not surprising as the Americans made no secret of their intention to see the great British empire closed down--nothing changed. There is a deal of work to be done on how neutrals, exile governments and personalities, resistance movements, and even the Soviets came to be aware of what was planned, and what they made of it all. For all its attractive qualities, this biography is not the place to start.

Instead, the quality of Roosevelt's feelings comes through abundantly, involving his personal relationships and life as a privileged aristocrat turned polio victim, his character and personality, the development of his conviction from early on that he was indeed a man of destiny. This is territory much mapped already; there are no notable discoveries here concerning his family, upbringing, schooling, or early career. Hamby thinks that the onset of polio was the great leveller in his life, bringing him into intense contact with fellow sufferers from all the social classes, changing his character for the better and enlarging his capacity for human empathy

The plentiful letters and other papers housed at Hyde Park--the family home and Presidential Library--are used as most readers would expect. There is thankfully discretion on the gentleman's various liaisons, but the enduring centrality of a group of special ladies is very clear, starting with his mother. Wife Eleanor gets her due, but mostly as an effective political operator and advisor in her own right. Hamby's reading complements many others when it suggests that although he treated all of his ladies shabbily some of the time, and some of them shabbily all the time, he must have drawn on them emotionally for a considerable part of the extraordinary effort of mind and body he displayed in coping with his many illnesses and other sources of extreme strain.

Such was the extraordinary career and character of this man that any one of the multitudinous Roosevelt biographies and analyses can produce a new story, angle, episode, or wisecrack, a reason no doubt why Hamby refers to many of them. What was probably the first, from 1952 (also entitled ***Man of Destiny***), drew this lesson from Roosevelt's campaigning style: "[His] unique ability to be invigorated by travel and contact with people was to serve him well for the rest of his life. For a politician it was an enormous advantage."[5] One of the latest, Frank Costigliola's dissection of the costs and benefits of Roosevelt's approach to geopolitics during the war, supplies this story: after the Yalta conference the dying man was asked if he was tired. "Of course I'm tired," came the reply, "You would be tired if you'd spent five years pushing Winston uphill in a wheelbarrow."[6]

Such flippancy to describe all the American efforts to bend British purposes to US war aims, ***and*** ensure the end of Britain's empire, was typical of this president, and of the contradictions he embodied. Hamby covers all of the latter, with dignity and politeness. But he fails to capture the profoundly unrealistic, wishful conviction of Roosevelt that the postwar United States would have the power and the means to impose on the rest of the world its designs for collective security and the global new deal, ending Old Europe and its ways, destroying colonialism, and neutralizing the Soviet Union. Both Costigliola and John L. Harper

in his indispensable essay, "The Roosevelt Solution," emphasize this key failure of the American leader, attributing it--in Harper's case--to "Jeffersonian hubris ... and sense of American superiority."[7] But the wide reading public this book is aimed at may find these faults forgiveable if the author has succeeded in convincing them that, as he writes in his conclusion: "American liberal democracy *was* [*sic*] the last best hope in the world, and its greatest tribune was Franklin D. Roosevelt" (p. 433).

Notes

[1]. Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "FDR Biographies," in *A Companion to Franklin D.Roosevelt*, ed. William D. Pederson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2. I am grateful to Gail Martin, librarian at the Johns Hopkins University, Bologna Center, for placing this 750-page, €197 volume at my disposal.

[2]. William J. Barber, *Designs within Disorder: Franklin D.Roosevelt, the Economists, and the Shaping of American Economic Policy, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

[3]. David Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and the Challenge of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[4]. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 73.

[5]. David E. Weingast, *Franklin D.Roosevelt: Man of Destiny* (New York: Julian Messner, 1952), 6.

[6]. Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 236.

[7]. In John Lamberton Harper, ed., *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D.Roosevelt, George F.Kennan, Dean G. Acheson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131.

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