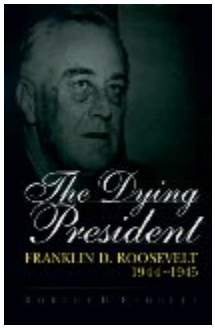
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert H. Ferrell. *The Dying President: Franklin D. Roosevelt 1944-1945.* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998. vii + 185 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1171-2.



Reviewed by Dennis J. Dunn (Southwest Texas State University)
Published on H-Pol (April, 1998)

FDR'S Disabilities

Robert H. Ferrell has written a fascinating book on Roosevelt's last year as president. Ferrell argues persuasively that FDR was too ill (of cardiovascular disease) to be president and that his physical disability led to a series of misjudgments and mistakes in 1944-45, including a lack of study of the need for the use of the atomic bomb against Japan, a nonchalance regarding the evidence of the Holocaust crime, an inattention to China and Chinese Communism, a casual support of French involvement in Vietnam with all of the attendant consequences of that fatal mistake for American foreign policy in the postwar period, an inadvertent backing of the ridiculous Morgenthau Plan, and an unconscionable isolation of Truman. The book reads like a good mystery, reviewing the confusion over the president's health in popular and scholarly sources, explaining why the confusion existed and persisted, and then finally solving the mystery and showing the consequences of FDR's poor health at the end of his presidency. The author discovers that FDR by and large managed the news regarding his poor health and deliberately pulled the wool over the eyes of the American public, his family, his political allies, and the news media regarding his fitness for office in 1944 and 1945. Ferrell believes that FDR was as ill as Woodrow Wilson was in his last year in office.

The book's thorough coverage of FDR's illness and the indisputable compounding effects of his sickness on foreign policy is a major contribution to the history of World War II and the Roosevelt legacy. This study documents the fact that FDR made major blunders which cost the United States dearly and saddled Truman with a bevy of bad policy options. As to why FDR hid the truth about his illness, Ferrell offers a number of explanations. He was a very private person, who did not share secrets with anyone. He was also self-reliant or, as Truman and Eisenhower concluded, egotistical, a trait which led them both to dislike Roosevelt. FDR also enjoyed the perks of the presidency and did not want to give them up. Finally, Ferrell conjectures that FDR, who hid his poliomyelitis from the public, might have naturally denied that he had a disease for fear of being treated differently or being marginalized politically. No matter what the reasons for his secrecy, the consequences were disastrous for American foreign policy.

Sickness, however, does not explain the bankruptcy of FDR's policy toward Stalin, which the book alludes to but does not study extensively. Perhaps, Ferrell chose not to deal with FDR's errors toward Stalin in 1944-45 because the errors were really part of a longstanding pattern, which FDR put into place when he became president in 1933. Illness, in other words, had little to do with FDR's misjudgments about the Baltic States, Poland, Finland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and the territories of northeast Asia. W. Averell Harriman declared that FDR thought Stalin was an evolving democrat and had to be extended a great deal of leeway as he pursued his evolutionary course because of Russia's autocratic traditions and insecurity in the face of German and Japanese aggression.[1] For that reason–belief in Stalin's embryonic democratic credentials–FDR ignored or tolerated Stalin's attack upon the Soviet peasantry, his alliance with Nazi Germany, his invasion of Poland, his

aggression against Finland, his forced assimilation of the Baltic States and Bessaraia and northern Bukovina into the USSR, and, eventually when he became an ally of the United States, his xenophobia and brutal attack upon the Poles from the Katyn Forest to the Warsaw Uprising. Of course, FDR had to defeat Hitler and Stalin was necessary for that, but FDR could have devised policies to defeat Hitler and check Stalin. Illness, in short, while unquestionably exacerbating his pusillanimous attitude toward Stalin in 1944-45, does not explain the serious errors in FDR's policy toward Stalin in 1933-44. However, Ferrell does provide the core explanation for FDR's misjudgments regarding Stalin: "The president admittedly possessed a basic weakness in foreign policy, and this was, as (Charles) Bohlen acutely remarked, his willingness to rely on "instinctive grasp" of a subject, his willingness to play hunches" (p. 106). In 1943, FDR told his first ambassador to the USSR, William Bullitt, that "I just have a hunch that Stalin is" not a brutal dictator, but a man who "won't try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace."[2] The foundation of FDR's "hunches" was his belief that some powers (the Soviet Union) were evolving, anti-imperialist social democracies whereas other powers (Great Britain) were attempting to uphold the old order of imperialism.

The Roosevelt scholars, who consistently place FDR among the top three American presidents for greatness–right after Lincoln and Washington–will perhaps not approve of this book, but it's time for a reassessment. FDR was a great president. He led the United States out of the depression, tapped the great reservoir of American idealism and faith in the future, and saved capitalism. He also led the United States ably against Germany and Japan. He made horrendous errors toward Stalin and now it is clear he also made massive blunders in 1944-45 because he was dying. The Ferrell book will be counted among the more significant studies of Roosevelt.

[1]. Dennis J. Dunn, *Caught Between Roosevelt and Stalin: America's Ambassadors to Moscow* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 5.

[2]. Ibid., p. 2.

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[Part 2: ""]

Date: Fri, 22 May 1998 05:53:37 -0400 (EDT) From: H-Net Review Project <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> To: Rnlx@aol.com Subject: Dunn on Ferrell, *The Dying President*

Here is Dunn's review of Ferrell's book copy-edited and ready for posting.

Steve Rohs H-Net Staff

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