

Matthew Dallek. *Defenseless under the Night: The Roosevelt Years and the Origins of Homeland Security.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 360 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-974312-4.

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Given the many controversies over homeland security in light of 9/11, with fear of foreign attack now pervading American life, it is important to learn how "the greatest generation" coped with national defense, particularly after the Pearl Harbor attack. Matthew Dallek begins his fine account with the hysteria generated by director Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast of October 30, 1938, when many gullible citizens panicked upon hearing a "realistic" dramatization of H. G. Wells's famous novel. His narrative ends in 1945, when President Harry Truman issued an executive order terminating the wartime civilian defense program.

Much of Dallek's account centers on the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD), established in May 1941 by Franklin D. Roosevelt's executive order. For the first time, the United States possessed a single federal department dedicated to the physical protection of 180 million Americans. The president appointed New York's colorful mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, as director. That September Roosevelt made his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, assistant director.

Although both figures possessed a long record of humanitarian reform, the "Little Flower" repeatedly clashed with "ER." The first lady stressed "social defense liberalism," envisioning the OCD's primary task as extending the New Deal. She had

conceded in February 1939 that her husband's domestic program had yet to "solve fundamental problems," having "merely bought us time to think" (p. 28).

Conversely, La Guardia concentrated on a "national security liberalism" that would focus on defense. The mayor stressed the need for public safety, downplayed individual liberties, and in general sought to infuse martial values into domestic society. To him the OCD was a fourth branch of the military, in its own way as crucial as the Army, Navy, and Marines. By this process, Dallek argues, His Honor was transforming the very meaning of liberalism itself, which now became synonymous with the militarization of the government's core functions. Little wonder ER soon balked.

Dallek effectively conveys American anxieties generated by the advent of air power, which began with Zeppelin raids on London during World War I. Indeed, the author reinforces Michael Sherer's claim that an "apocalyptic mentality, consisting of expectations of ultimate danger and destruction" existed several decades before the Cold War (p. 268n34). Events in Ethiopia, Spain, and China merely reinforced such fears, and Edward R. Murrow's wartime broadcasts from London made the blitz vivid to American listeners.

Though Dallek does not delve into the matter, Franklin Roosevelt's anti-interventionist foes also made arguments based on air power. A strong air arm, they argued, would protect the Western Hemisphere while avoiding dependence upon a conscript army. Furthermore, German bombers could not reach the United States, as round-trip flights were far too risky. Any invasion of ground troops could be quickly repelled, attacking ships being bombed out of the ocean before they could land.

Admittedly, as Dallek notes, there was no evidence that Germany possessed aircraft carriers and air bases capable of launching raids on East Coast targets. After the United States entered the war, the continent experienced only minor attacks. In June 1942, Japanese submarines shelled a town on the Oregon coast. That September they shelled the coast of Santa Barbara while a sea-plane bombed a forest in Oregon.

Dallek concludes that La Guardia effectively mobilized hundreds of thousands of Americans, drew positive notice for his drills, and taught much of the East Coast to cope with air raids and sabotage. Furthermore, his "campaign to spread public fear" (p. 172) was rooted in a sincere belief that an Axis attack was imminent. His reportorial trips to London were by no means propaganda ploys but sincere fact-finding missions.

But with La Guardia there was a price to be paid. The Little Flower endorsed spying on civilians he personally considered subversive. Once Pearl Harbor was attacked, he prohibited all Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans from meeting publicly, confining them to their homes and detaining many on Ellis Island. On New Year's Day, 1942, he called his critics "Japs" and "friends of Japs" (p. 197). Indeed, there were few public officials who better epitomized what Leo P. Ribuffo has called "the brown scare," in which "fifth-columnists" were ubiquitous and anti-interventionists were branded as pro-Axis subversives.[1]

At times one had the sense of energy in a vacuum. La Guardia launched an unpopular "Freedom Sunday" campaign that involved clergy preaching a canned sermon written by the OCD. In 1941 he predicted that German bombers could soon fly over the capital. Touring the nation, he recommended distributing fifty million gas masks, which included two million "Mickey Mouse" masks for children. He suggested that occupants of skyscrapers lock themselves in their offices so as not to add to the panic on the streets below. As an executive, Gotham's Paul Revere was totally disorganized, firing employees on sheer whim, chastising aides, and melodramatically running from one city to another.

Three days after the strike on Hawaii, La Guardia was in San Francisco, warning its inhabitants that they must expect that combat would reach their very homes. Because of a false alarm concerning an air strike on Hempstead's Mitchell Field, New York City experienced sheer panic. When the mayor returned to Gracie Mansion, Dallek writes, he revealed himself as both hot-headed and inept. On February 10, 1942, Roosevelt secured his resignation.

Ultimately, the OCD's new director, James Landis, proved little better. Until this point, Landis had been an able New Deal administrator and defender of civil liberties. Yet Dallek finds the Harvard law professor outdoing his predecessor in forging "the home front into aspects of a police state" (p. 230). Landis "strained to militarize civilians," trafficking in "a message of fear." Urging his countrymen to "think war, sleep war, and eat war" (p. 13), he, too, predicted the impending of bombing of American cities. Landis championed the removal of Japanese Americans to "relocation camps." In the face of all evidence, he claimed that spies and saboteurs jeopardized the nation's security. Procedures for establishing the loyalty of enemy aliens were downright Byzantine.

Continually warning of enemy attack, Landis warned Southern Californians, "We ought to have

the guts to fight with our bare hands" (p. 235). "Get ready to be bombed," he told *American Magazine* readers in May 1943 (p. 253). If the Germans reached the African coast, they could, he warned, acquire enough bases to endanger Chicago before anyone realized it. In fairness, Dallek does praise Landis for espousing some "social defense" opinions, such as that hunger and poverty were evils akin to Nazi militarism. His OCD did promote nutrition, foster physical fitness, and establish day care centers.

Dallek gives Eleanor Roosevelt much attention. He notes her conversion from pacifism to interventionism. In 1935, she had written, "the war idea is obsolete" (p. 21). Within three years she was claiming, "Force is the only voice which carries conviction and weight with certain groups" (p. 23). The coming war, she predicted, would be fought for control of land, sea, and air space. As the CDO's assistant director, she saw in the agency a chance to advance her reformist agenda. In her post she led a program that ultimately recruited over ten million volunteers, who did everything from providing medical and child care to planting victory gardens.

Yet at times ER betrayed certain intolerant and imperious tendencies. Though far more dedicated to aiding Jewish refugees than most of her countrymen, she wrote a German friend in 1939 that "the ascendancy of the Jewish people" should be curbed (p. 26). In 1940 she urged Congress to pass legislation mandating national service for all young Americans. Contributing to the brown scare, she compared "isolationists" to Nazi appeasers. Adding to wartime hysteria, she wrote in January 1942 that Axis air attacks on America were inevitable.

ER's position became untenable when, early in 1942, she hired a professional dancer to help build children's morale. The OCD gave one Mayris Chaney, who had performed in a night club as a "fan dancer," a \$4,600 annual salary at a time when the average soldier was drawing \$21 a

week. Even Eleanor's husband could not rescue her and she was immediately let go.

This work engages in occasional demythologizing. Dallek writes that despite the Court-packing fiasco, major Republican gains in the 1938 elections, and efforts at wartime preparation, many progressives held firm to New Deal liberalism and sought to go beyond Roosevelt's reforms of the mid-1930s. Eleanor Roosevelt envisioned recruiting virtually all American women as volunteers to provide food, shelter, and health care to every citizen. In a sense, the president's 1944 "Economic Bill of Rights" served as the logical outcome of her vision.

Overall, *Defenseless Under the Night* is well written and its conclusions cogent. Dallek has engaged in a prodigious amount of work in such sources as the records of the OCD, the diaries of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, and the papers of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, La Guardia, and Landis.

Errors are few. The Wright Brothers takes a plural (p. 42). In May 1940 ER spoke to the American Youth Congress, not Conference (p. 55). Franklin Roosevelt could not have been fighting for Lend Lease in 1940, as the bill was only debated in early 1941 (p. 75). Dallek might want to note that OCD staffer Paul Kellogg already had a distinguished career as a progressive editor and reformer. Though it might be impossible to quantify, one wonders how much OCD attention was devoted to social defense in comparison to its military defense efforts. Despite the continuation of New Deal rhetoric by certain progressives and despite some reformist measures of the OCD, how much lasting social change took place under its aegis?

Dallek provides us with a haunting account, one highly relevant to the anxiety-ridden nation of today.

Note

[1]. Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depres-*

sion to the Cold War (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), chapter 5.

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