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### “The Most Complicated Human Being I Ever Knew”

Stanley Weintraub, *Young Mr. Roosevelt: FDR's Introduction to War, Politics, and Life*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 265. ISBN 978-0-306-82118-9.

Stanley Weintraub, *Final Victory: FDR's Extraordinary World War II Presidential Campaign*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 318. ISBN 978-0-306-82113-4.

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The multifaceted personality of Franklin Delano Roosevelt continues to fascinate us. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins called FDR “the most complicated human being I ever knew”; Winston Churchill wrote of “his buoyant sparkle, his iridescent personality, and his inner élan.” It is no surprise, then, that prolific historian Stanley Weintraub, author of nearly fifty books, should now offer us two modest studies of the first and last chapters of Roosevelt’s political career. While neither breaks new ground conceptually, their narrative style will attract many readers.

*Young Mr. Roosevelt* focuses on the years 1913–20, when FDR served as Assistant to Navy Secretary Joseph Daniels,<sup>1</sup> a time when, Weintraub argues, “the FDR we, and history, remember began to emerge” (xiii). A rising political star with a magical family name, Roosevelt had craved the office: he loved the Navy and his position allowed him to sit at the “same oversized desk used by Uncle Ted” (21). In 1913, the US Navy operated 259 ships at an annual expenditure of \$143 million. When Secretary Daniels left him in charge as acting secretary, as he often did, Roosevelt proved to be a dynamo, visiting navy yards, testifying before Congress, writing articles for magazines, and reviewing the fleet. In 1914, he helped lay the keel of the ill-fated USS *Arizona*. His “grasp of naval affairs ... seemed to astonish” members of Congress and he quickly became an “efficient executive with irreplaceable experience” (73, 125).

Handsome, gregarious, and ambitious, FDR networked aggressively, meeting such members of the older elite as Adm. George Dewey, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and Henry Adams, as well as many men who later served him during his presidency, including future admirals William “Bull” Halsey, Chester Nimitz, and William Leahy. Roosevelt forcefully promoted fleet modernization and embraced new technologies, including the radio and the airplane. When World War I broke out, he quietly advocated preparedness and intervention. He “made no secret of his pro-Ally sentiments, but he would not publicly cross Daniels [a pacifist] by overtly taking sides” (74). The war so raised FDR’s visibility that he was chosen “by acclamation” (232) to be the democratic party’s candidate for vice president in 1920. Though not expecting to win, he brought his “ebullient” personality (244) to the campaign, his eyes concentrated on future political opportunities. He made clear that “my heart will always be with the Navy” (236).

In *Final Victory*, Weintraub describes the “extraordinary” presidential election of 1944, the first held in wartime since 1864 and the only time a president sought a fourth term. The President postponed his “desire to retire to a quiet life at Hyde Park” (36), in order to win the war, establish a just international order, and guarantee prosperity at home. Roosevelt created some confusion and hard feelings among Democrats by delaying his decision to run, maneuvering to be nominated by acclamation at the Chicago convention, and scheming to replace Henry Wallace with Harry Truman as his running mate. The Republican convention, nominating Thomas Dewey and John Bricker, was a decorous affair in comparison.

The 1944 campaign was unlike any since. There were no debates between candidates; in fact, Roosevelt refused even to use Dewey’s name. Instead, all four candidates toured the country in private trains deliver-

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1. For more on Daniels and the administration of the early twentieth-century US navy, see now Lee A. Craig, *Josephus Daniels: His Life and Times* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2013). Craig notes FDR’s “personal magnetism” and “potential for greatness” (368).

ing major radio addresses before large audiences in cities and speaking informally in small towns along the rail lines. Due to the weight of wartime responsibilities, FDR tried to curtail his personal appearances, but his opponents' actions frequently drew him out. Conservatives, both Democratic and Republican, made strenuous efforts to limit the soldier vote, thought to be heavily pro-Roosevelt. Republicans criticized the President's conduct of the war and the state of the national economy. Reaching further back, they even blamed him for the Depression. Some accused him of anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> Outright fantasy and fiction flew across the airways: Roosevelt was a fascist, a monarchist, a communist—"Projecting a Red scare had become the last-stretch theme of the Dewey campaign" (248). Vice presidential candidate Harry Truman was "smeared" as a member of the KKK (229). Republicans claimed that the President had, during his Alaska tour, left his Scottish terrier Fala<sup>3</sup> behind, forcing the government to spend millions retrieving him. Roosevelt mocked this lie in a withering speech—"the finest ... he ever made," said aide Samuel Rosenman (146)—at the Teamsters Union dinner in Philadelphia (October 1944). FDR's antagonism toward Dewey and his party intensified during the campaign; as he told Gen. Douglas MacArthur, "I'll beat that son-of-a-bitch if it's the last thing I do" (94, 280). Although some polls predicted a close race, his victory was decisive: 432-99 electoral votes.<sup>4</sup>

Both of Weintraub's books explore FDR's relationship with Lucy Mercer Rutherford. After her husband's appointment as Assistant Secretary, Eleanor Roosevelt found much to dislike about being an official's wife. Dutiful, yet insecure and uncomfortable with the social obligations of her position, she spent long periods at her mother-in-law's home at Hyde Park or at FDR's summer place at Campobello in New Brunswick. Meanwhile, her charming, extroverted, aspiring husband saw to his duties in Washington. The young, attractive, capable, and socially connected Lucy Mercer was hired as a personal secretary to handle many of the details of Eleanor's life. Franklin thus encountered her regularly in his own home and in the close-knit society of early twentieth-century Washington. At some point, they began a correspondence and one thing led to another. When Eleanor discovered and read some of the letters in 1918, she demanded an end to the "affair." Franklin acquiesced, for divorce in those days would have scuttled his political career. However, by 1944, Lucy was again part of his social circle. Eleanor by this point was an activist First Lady whose relations with FDR had become more professional than personal.<sup>5</sup> Franklin's daughter Anna and cousin Margaret Suckly facilitated meetings between the, by then, widowed Lucy Rutherford and the often lonely President. The couple communicated with some frequency. Lucy made visits to the White House and, during the campaign, Roosevelt's train stopped near her home so they could visit over lunch. Insiders were aware of the relationship, but the public knew nothing—"in that more discreet era, personal lives usually remained private from press accounts" (88).

A second topic common to both books is FDR's health. Already in *Young Mr. Roosevelt*, we see him afflicted with bronchitis, influenza, typhoid fever, tonsillitis, and appendicitis. He was incapacitated with "acute bilateral pneumonia" (171-72) when Eleanor discovered the letters from Lucy Mercer. Though these were serious, sometimes life-threatening, conditions, he always bounced back. Then, in the 1920s, he contracted polio and would never walk normally again.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, he had always to forestall concerns about his physical ability to serve in high office. In this, he generally succeeded, but the situation had worsened by 1944: he had lost weight, appeared gray and often listless or unfocused. His own doctor, Vice Adm. Ross McIntire, "a medical nobody" (7), offered little assistance. FDR's family finally demanded a complete physical (including his first blood pressure check in four years!). Experts were called in, and the well known

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2. For a thorough recent treatment of this subject, see Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2013).

3. Immortalized in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1501.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1501.htm).

4. See David Jordan's more academic and analytical approach to the campaign in *FDR, Dewey, and the Election of 1944* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2011).

5. See Doris Kearns Goodwin's essential, Pulitzer Prize-winning *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (1994; rpt. NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

6. See James Tobin, *The Man He Became: How FDR Defied Polio to Win the Presidency* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

heart specialist Howard Bruenn diagnosed “congestive cardiac failure and hypertensive heart failure” (8) exacerbated by chronic respiratory ailments. Bruenn, who now became part of the President’s entourage, prescribed more rest, better diet, and fewer cocktails. FDR cooperated, but remained oddly detached from the entire situation. As opponents spread rumors about his health, he made more outdoor appearances (New York, Chicago, and Boston) to allay such claims and “demonstrate his fitness” (34). Weintraub writes that “he was more concerned with losing [the election] than with dying” (117). Indeed, “the campaign seemed better medicine than [the] prescribed inactivity” as the President “seemed to thrive on his renewed thrust into electioneering” (245, 268). His elevated blood pressure actually dropped.

Finally, both books discuss Roosevelt at war in some detail. In *Young Mr. Roosevelt*, we see the Assistant Secretary traveling to Europe during the First World War to oversee American forces and supervise efforts to close the North Sea with mines. FDR evinced a proprietary concern for “my Navy men”—“my Marine regiments” (152). He conferred with nearly everyone who mattered: Georges Clemenceau, Douglas Haig, and King Albert of Belgium. Eager to see the real war, he was proud to have come “under actual fire” (164, 170). He even sought to leave politics in order to wear a uniform (the large naval guns mounted on railroad cars that pounded the Germans particularly attracted him), but President Woodrow Wilson and Secretary Daniels would not permit it.

In the immediate post-World War I period, FDR returned to Europe “in full charge of all questions ... involving the disposal of Navy property” (193). In 1944, he was commander in chief of twelve million men and women. He traveled to military bases and industrial facilities all over the country and broadcast his acceptance speech from the Camp Pendleton marine base in San Diego county, California. During the campaign, he met with Churchill and Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King in Quebec. He also visited General MacArthur in Hawaii to confer on strategy to win the Pacific war, returning via Alaska, where Fala was *not* left behind.

While Weintraub’s narratives are quite engaging, he does not delve systematically into any specific relevant issues along the way. And, too, his prose is rather turgid, diffuse, and marred by an excess of subordinate clauses and occasional outdated colloquialisms: in 1944, “bigwigs” sometimes “tool by” (94, 137), while earlier in the century government jobs are “traded like cigarette cards” (27). Factual errors are rare and mostly trivial.<sup>7</sup> More serious are pressing questions never raised. What exactly, for example, was life like on those four campaign trains crisscrossing the country in 1944? What were the traditions and strategies of campaigning in that era? Did the 1944 campaign differ from that of 1940, also, in a way, a wartime election? And how did FDR manage to juggle the day-to-day oversight of the war along with the demands of campaigning and planning the future of the postwar world? No more than hints are dropped here.

While no writer can completely capture the complexities of FDR and his times,<sup>8</sup> Stanley Weintraub has given us succinct, intriguing sketches of two critical periods in Franklin Roosevelt’s life. No small achievement.

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7. The great naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan is twice misidentified as “Arthur,” and Ross McIntire is called Surgeon General instead of Surgeon General *of the Navy*.

8. Excellent multi-volume biographies are available, however: James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), and *Roosevelt, the Soldier of Freedom: 1940–1945* (NY: History Book Club, 2006); and Kenneth Davis, *FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny, 1882–1928* (1972; rpt. NY: Random House, 1993), *FDR: The New York Years 1928–1933* (id., 1985), *FDR: The New Deal Years 1933–1937* (id., 1986), *FDR: Into the Storm 1937–1940* (id., 1993), *FDR: The War President, 1940–1943* (id., 2000). A superb one-volume study is Jean E. Smith’s *FDR* (NY: Random House, 2007).