

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

BOOK REVIEW

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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DAVIE, FL

12 NOVEMBER 2003

## Book Review

Heinrichs, Waldo. *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry Into World War II*, 1988. 279 pages.

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Most people when broached about the question of the United States' entry into World War II tend to believe the words that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed in his December 8, 1941 speech before Congress, that the attack by Japan at Pearl Harbor and other territories was "unprovoked." However, author Waldo Heinrichs, writes in his masterful and balanced narrative *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry Into World War II*, that the attack was not unprovoked, and that it was a result of tense negotiations and a failure of diplomacy with Japan. Heinrichs also goes into great detail about the Axis Powers alliance that Japan had entered into with Germany and Italy and talks about their mutual agreement to support each other in the event that war was declared on any of them.

On March 11, 1941, the United States began to move away from isolationism with the passage of the Lend-Lease act, which was primarily designed by FDR to give aid to Great Britain to help them fight against Germany. Lend-Lease helped to give Great Britain's struggling economy a boost during World War II and helped them sustain the heavy losses to their food supplies, ships, and other war supplies that were destroyed by Germany. At the time of its passage, it was generally believed that an attack on the British mainland was imminent. However, the way things turned out, the U-Boat attacks, which were launched from afar on parts of Great Britain seems to have been a smoke screen to allow Germany the necessary time it needed to make preparations for an all out

war with the Soviet Union, which it launched on June 22, 1941. The main purpose of the U-Boat attacks in the Atlantic seems to have been to preoccupy Great Britain and possibly the United States in the Battle of the Atlantic and keep them from supporting the Soviet Union in combat. Germany's attack on the Soviet Union decisively and effectively ended the Nazi-Soviet Pact that was signed between the two countries in 1939.

Aside from fighting against Communism, Hitler's main purpose for attacking the Soviet Union was to secure oil from the Caucasus and to procure grain from the Ukraine, the breadbasket of the Soviet Union. Heinrichs contends that these were essential goods to Hitler and were necessary to attain if his plan for world domination was going to come to fruition. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain expressed great concern and fear to FDR and the United States over Hitler's plans. Churchill had a strong desire to get U.S. assistance for support in the Battle of the Atlantic and so, he did not miss his chance to try and express the danger that Germany posed to the United States, as German U-Boats had begun drifting into the western Atlantic. Historian David Reynolds claims, "the cords that bound the two countries were becoming thicker, more tangled, and more secure."

As for Japan, which was part of the Axis Powers with Germany and Italy, they too had a desire to expand and to create a great empire. However, the problem was that Japan's empirical desires were coming very close to encroaching on colonies that belonged to the United States and Great Britain. Heinrichs contends that Great Britain and the U.S. had a fear that Japan would soon try to invade colonies that belonged to them. The United States was especially nervous because they were weakly defending

their colony of the Philippines, and they had only a small Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which it could use to defend the colony. Preventing further Japanese expansion southward was the definitive goal for the U.S. in extensive diplomatic talks with Japan. However, communication difficulties and the Axis agreement that Japan strictly followed made the act of diplomacy next to impossible. However, talks between Japan and the U.S. would continue until very close to the outbreak of war.

But in July 1941, Japan continued to move southward, taking over French Indochina. Japan may have truly believed that they were not violating or interfering with America or Great Britain's empires, especially since their World War I partner, France had already fallen to Germany. Japan contends that they were trying to protect themselves because they believed that the eventual Allied Powers were encircling them and planned to take them over. Whether this was the result of a guilty conscience or actual fear is a matter that can be debated. Increasingly, the British were trying to tempt FDR into entering the war, but as Heinrichs rationalizes, FDR continued to hold out because he did not feel that he had the mandate of the people to enter into war. Americans would allow support with the risk of war to support Great Britain and prevent further expansion by Japan, but would not seek war as a choice. After the Japanese moved midway between the Philippines and Pearl Harbor with its invasion of Indochina, America focused more attention on its base in the Philippines and increased the air power of the base immensely.

At the same time, the majority of Americans favored cutting off oil to Japan, after the intention had been made public because they had been informed that Japan could use the oil to expand closer and possibly enter into the British or American colonies. But at

the same time, FDR wanted to make the embargo slow and progressive so that it would not be a shock to the Japanese and seem like an attack on them. But after FDR learned that Japan was hoarding enough oil to last them for two years, having purchased various oils that were not included in the embargo, at the end of July 1941, FDR decided to freeze Japanese funds in America to prevent them from having widespread access to American oil. The end of July 1941 seemed to be a high point in World War II for America. The U.S. had not entered into World War II, the British with limited help from America were winning the Battle of the Atlantic, and the Soviets were on the offensive for the first time after suffering several defeats against Germany, wiping out a massive number of German soldiers. At this point, FDR believed that Germany, which had seized most of Europe, was not invincible and could be defeated.

In talks between Japan and the U.S., FDR wanted to seek an agreement that if the U.S. was forced to go to war with Germany as a result of the Battle of the Atlantic that Japan would not counter with a declaration of war against the United States, which were the terms of the Axis agreement. However, the Japanese would not violate their Axis agreement. So, it appears, there was “honor among thieves,” after all. In trying to compromise, the U.S. tried to appease Japan by accepting the fact that they had taken Indochina, but asked Japan to neutralize it and to stop further advancement southward. To that, Japan countered by asking the U.S. to help them get out of their never-ending war with China and to seek peace. Japan also wanted the U.S. to remove their troops from a base near China. But, the problem remained. Japan was unwilling to compromise.

By late August, with an increasing number of U-Boats entering the Atlantic, FDR said “From now on, if German and Italian vessels enter the waters [of the western Atlantic], the protection of which is necessary for American defense, they do so at their own peril.” Heinrichs makes it clear that this policy of self-defense was supported by sixty-two percent of Americans. August 1941 was even tenser for the Soviets who a month earlier had been on the offensive, were now being pounded. Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator asked Great Britain to open a second front to divert Germany’s onslaught, however Great Britain was preoccupied with trying to protect its own colonies. The U.S.-- which had trouble producing supplies-- along with Great Britain attempted to help Stalin with planes and tanks that he requested. However, in most cases, the production capabilities of both countries would never allow them to meet Soviet needs. Author Waldo Heinrichs emphasizes in his book that this made Stalin angry and increasingly suspicious of Great Britain and the U.S.

By September, the U.S. and its partners had set in place an absolute oil embargo on Japan, sending the island-nation into a panic. They felt that because all of the democracies were opposed to Japanese expansion and as a result, put an embargo on them that they were out to encircle and destroy Japan---and maybe they were right. Negotiations did not help and tensions increased. By early November, Japan moved its troops into southern Indochina and increased the number of troops in the territory. They were clearly going to do as they pleased, even at the risk of going to war. Around the same time in early November, the U.S. decided to extend Lend-Lease aid to the Soviets because the U.S. feared that if Germany defeated the Soviets that they would be unstoppable and would then threaten America’s security and democracy and. This aid

was especially crucial because by the end of November, the Soviet capital, Moscow, was on the verge of collapse. In the Pacific, with Japan continuing to advance southward and talks going nowhere, Congress rescinded all neutrality laws, which made Americans realize that war was imminent.

Soon after neutrality laws were rescinded, on December 7, 1941 after diplomatic relations between Japan and the U.S. had been severed for about ten days, Japan attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, along with Singapore, the Philippines, Guam, Wake, and Hong Kong. The Japanese paranoia, as Heinrichs explains, was the feeling that everyone was out to get them, and they truly believed that they had no choice but to go to war. It was a matter of survival to them. The following day, after the attacks, on December 8, the U.S. declared war on the “empire of Japan.” Then, three days later, abiding by the Axis agreement, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. After the U.S. entered World War II, George Washington’s original desire for isolation and neutrality was gone forever.

The sources that were used in researching this book are overwhelming. Heinrichs draws his research from numerous manuscript collections from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, the Library of Congress, as well as collections maintained by several top Universities in the U.S. To that, he made use of a great number of naval and military records, and made use of American, British, and Japanese correspondence and documents that were found in the National Archives in Washington D.C. But he did not stop there. He also prepared research from a countless number of published books, all of which helped to make this a great and important addition to the literature on World War II.

The book written by professor Waldo Heinrichs of Temple University is scholarly and assumes that the reader has at least a general knowledge of the world events during World War II. Perhaps the only drawback to the book is the microprint that the publisher, *Oxford University Press* wanted to torment the reader with. But, even the print size cannot detract from the flow of the book and comprehension of all the decisions and indecisions that led to the U.S. entering into a war against Japan and in Europe. Step by step, the author gives the views from both sides in a balanced portrait to demonstrate the real fears, concerns, and obligations of all parties in making the decisions that were ultimately made. Unfortunately, the events that proceeded could not be sorted out and handled diplomatically. But that is often the reality of what happens when proud nations, which fear the power and ideals of one another clash. If the reader wants a better understanding of the course of events that led the United States into World War II, this writer can attest that the reader will not find a better book than that of Waldo Heinrichs' *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry Into World War II*.

Roger Daniels - Coming to America: A History of Immigration 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2002  
 perennial (publisher) 17.95

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