

Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles

Irwin Gellman

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“You know I am a juggler, and I never let my right hand know what my left hand does... I may be entirely inconsistent, and furthermore I am perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help win the war.”

-- President Franklin Roosevelt to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, 1942.

Author and independent historian Irwin Gellman’s biography of three key American political leaders before and during World War II reads like a novel. Quotes from the protagonists (President Franklin Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Undersecretary of State Sumner Wells) as well their allies and detractors fill the entire book. Gellman states early on: “Novelists have no trouble constructing their make believe schemes because plot and character and development may be conveniently intertwined as the need arises.” On reflection, the narration may have been a little too “conveniently intertwined”, with key events missing as the need arose.

Life to most is generally unremarkable, interactions between others as solitary events.

By contrast, Gellman’s tale is a Netflix drama waiting to be written: a confluence of Roosevelt, the master architect of the war against Japan and Germany and an America-centric new world order, Hull, his loyal yet feckless Secretary of State and his a closet homosexual underling, Welles, whom he despises, nonetheless advises the President on foreign policy.

The lack of attention to crucial details makes the book’s storyline too “convenient”. We are all told that Roosevelt had no hand--at all--in fomenting the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and that Roosevelt was blissfully unaware of Japan’s machinations. Gellman faithfully follows orthodoxy, dismissing any suggestion that Roosevelt knew of an impending Japanese attack on America as “erroneous” and “simplistic”. Gellman further muddies the waters when he suggests that Roosevelt was more interested in Hitler and Mussolini, thus “ignoring” the Pacific and when discussion was raised with Roosevelt, these were merely “distractions” from the “larger European puzzle.”

By 1940, the US was able to read Japan’s encrypted diplomatic messages. Thus, Commander-in-Chief Roosevelt knew Japan’s overseas strategy. Whether this knowledge shaped his strategy to enter into the European conflict on the side of Briatain, we are not told at all. And this is not the only omission.

We could have learned:

Why Roosevelt, initially supportive, was ultimately dismissive of an initiative to host a summit between himself and Prime Minister Konoye Fumimaro to reconcile differences between the US and Japan in mid-1941;

Why Roosevelt sent a letter to Emperor Showa on the eve of Pearl Harbor, chiding Japan of its “aggression”;

What Roosevelt meant with his comment, of maneuvering “them [the Japanese] into the position to fire the first shot” at his War Cabinet meeting of November 25, 1941;

Of his reaction (“This means war!”), upon reading the decrypted Japanese cable rejecting further negotiations with the U.S. on December 6, 1941.

The current book missed a grand opportunity in explaining Roosevelt’s single-mindedness in dragging America into a war no one, neither the American public nor the Japanese, wanted. Long before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt allowed American military pilots to fight for the Republic of China against Japan—in violation of American neutrality.

Whether the gaps were deliberate or not is something only the author of the current book can address.

Omissions and gaps could work the other way as well: perhaps there was absolutely nothing at all. For example, we read that Roosevelt “considered an armed response” upon hearing of the sinking of the *USS Panay* on December 12, 1937, just off Nanking, by Japanese forces, which was in the midst of a conflict against the Republic of China. The matter was eventually settled with a formal Japanese apology and compensation. While the *Panay* was under attack, Japanese ground troops were on the verge of capturing Nanking, the capital of the Republic of China. The book relates nothing, from either Roosevelt or Hull, on Japan’s “Rape of Nanking”. When one considers Roosevelt’s pro-China upbringing, one has to wonder why he said nothing of a so-called “Rape of Nanking”. One can draw his own conclusion—either the Roosevelt administration thought nothing of the “Rape of Nanking” or, more likely, there was no “Rape of Nanking”.

Gellman claims that Roosevelt had “no interest” in Asia and yet he favored “closer contacts with China”, without further explanation. In fact, one will need to read elsewhere to understand Roosevelt’s high regard of China and his visceral dislike of Japan and the Japanese. For example, we learn elsewhere that Roosevelt inherited a love of China through the Delano side of his family.¹ He listened with rapt attention to Grandfather’s and Mother’s stories of their time in “Old China”. We also learn elsewhere that Roosevelt

¹ Bradley, J. (2015). *The China Mirage*. NY, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

hoped to cure the Japanese race of their “inherent wickedness” by “miscegenation”.² However, to Roosevelt, “A Japanese-European crossing ... was “thoroughly bad.”” His view mirrored that of Professor Ales Hrdlicka of the Smithsonian Institution, who believed the Japanese were “nefarious” because they were “less developed”. Roosevelt consulted Hrdlicka on such matters.

Gellman does allow a few of Roosevelt’s failings, such as his long standing extramarital affair with Lucy Mercer, his wife Eleanor’s private secretary. Once Eleanor found out about the affair, while Franklin was Assistant Secretary of the Navy, he was made to promise to never see her again. However, he secretly met Lucy a number of times during his final years in the White House. She was present (and quickly shuttled out) when Roosevelt died at Warm Springs, GA. While seeing nothing wrong with keeping a mistress, he was “offended” with Eleanor’s own affair with a “youthful” Joseph Lash, a socialist agitator (think Antifa).³

Roosevelt’s wartime death raises an interesting observation—Gellman states that “condolences poured in from around the globe”. Not stated in the book, but even Japan sent condolences: “A Tokyo domestic broadcast in the Japanese language said, “We indeed grieve to learn of the death of President Roosevelt. We didn’t expect that he could pass away when the whole world is in such a state of chaos...”⁴ Certainly, this display of Japanese respect at a time of American mourning, belies the standard Western wartime propaganda that characterizes the Japanese as sub-humans. By contrast, we do not hear in the current book of Roosevelt’s denouncement of sending Japanese body parts to the US as trophies.

Roosevelt set foreign policy and readers will conclude that Hull was nothing more than the President’s messenger. Based on the book, one’s impression would be entirely correct—Hull had little to do with events that led to war with Japan. In fact, the infamous “Hull note”, a list of American demands for continued peace with Japan, was written by Soviet mole Harry Dexter White, an official in the Treasury Department. White even obtained approval of the memo from his superior, Secretary Morgenthau, who sent it to Roosevelt.⁵

Unlike other well-heeled members of Roosevelt’s clique, Tennessean Hull did not attend an elite private school or graduate from an Ivy League college. We learn of his diagnosis of tuberculosis (or possibly sarcoidosis, a chronic lung disease), which necessitated frequent

² Janssens, R.V.A. (1995). *What Future for Japan?* Atlanta, GA: Rodopi.

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/12/12/secret-hoover-files-show-misuse-of-fbi/6ba74dc7-a6b7-447b-95a1-ea2ff28ecacc/>

⁴ *Life*, April 23, 1945.

⁵ Koster, J. (2012). *Operation Snow*. Washington, DC: Regnery.

and long absences from his job. (While out of the office, Undersecretary Wells took over day to day operations of the State Department.) The book points out that Hull's appointment to head the State Department was a merely a sop to the politically powerful southern Democrats, who Roosevelt needed to retain his grip on the White House. In fact, Hull was not thinking about staying at the State Department as he hoped to run for President in 1940, as Roosevelt's chosen successor. However, Hull never received Roosevelt's blessing as Roosevelt decided to run for a third term. Until the end of his life, Hull seethed in silence.

The final character in Gellman's tale is Welles, a closeted homosexual. He was viewed at the time as a security risk because of his sexual preference. Roosevelt eventually found out about Welles after asking J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, to investigate. Despite abhorring homosexuality, Roosevelt did nothing and left Secretary Hull to deal with Welles. Hull came to despise Welles, primarily because he spoke directly to Roosevelt concerning policy, bypassing Hull. Hull was not above leaking embarrassing information to lackeys in order to get Welles to resign. Despite the (apparent) fact that Welles was superior to Hull as an administrator, Welles eventually resigned in 1943.

If nothing else, after reading the current book, one will need to reflect on the mental stability and moral fortitude of those Americans who held the power of life and death during a crucial period in history.