

FDR as Conservative Champion?

It is time the intelligent Right deprived the moronic Left of the ability to swaddle their socialistic cynicism and defeatism in the great and misapplied legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

by Conrad Black



Writing on President's Day last month, I engaged in the fundamentally disagreeable activity of taking issue with people with whom I always wish to agree and generally do, on the still very unsettled subject of Franklin D. Roosevelt. My contention for many years, advanced in my 2003 [biography of FDR](#), is that Roosevelt was in fact, as he considered himself to be, a *conservative*—though a reforming one.

At the time, I was objecting to a televised exchange of nodding complementary agreement between Mark Levin and retired professor Burton Folsom. I usually agree with Levin and almost always do when he is discussing contemporary affairs. The only encounter I have had with Folsom was a very civilized

disagreement about Roosevelt in writing with him about 15 years ago, and I have had the occasion to go over the same points with Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn, where Folsom was a faculty member for many years.

Last week, [Mark Pulliam of Misrule of Law](#), an internet “chronicle of legal and judicial mischief,” took up these same cudgels and accused me being “full of vitriol” toward Levin and Folsom for criticizing “FDR’s performance and the efficacy of the New Deal,” of writing a “hagiographic biography” of him as “Black . . . obviously adores Roosevelt.” At least I am granted the distinction of being put together with my friend Newt Gingrich as a conservative defender of FDR. This assault came in the midst of what was a very perceptive summary of the fragmentation of the American conservative intelligentsia in response to the Trump phenomenon.

As anyone who has read any part of it is aware, my book was not at all a hagiography—Roosevelt was not a very ethical or amiable person, despite his overpowering charm and suavity, and his indisputable courage in managing his infirmity (polio). He was, however, a great leader and the most important man in the world in the 20th century, and with Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, the greatest champion of democracy at least since the American Revolution, if not the Periclean Age.

I offered no vitriol at all against Levin and Folsom; since I generally share their perspective my purpose is not to antagonize but to recommend a tactical change of course to contemporary thinking conservatives.

My motive is both to *strengthen* the appeal of Trump-era conservatism, and to correct the widespread misperception of Roosevelt as a socialist and somehow the person responsible for the present leviathan-state. It was for that reason that I wrote the book about FDR, which I commend to Pulliam and to Levin. I think Folsom read at least part of it, which prompted

him to take issue with me.

My purpose here is entirely constructive. I seek the avoidance of an exchange of fire between ideological and policy allies over an esoteric historical matter based on the long uncontradicted view on the American Right that Roosevelt was an enemy of conservatism. Roosevelt wanted to make America safe for wealthy people like himself. Both as a matter of Christian justice and political practicality, he wanted a contented working-class and agrarian class, as he thought equitable in a rich country, and the only assurance against social instability. He cut back the benefit system in the summers and said to his cabinet, "No one dies of starvation in this country in the summer."

He restricted straight cash payments of unemployment benefit to those incapable of working or finding work and operated immense workfare schemes that built much of the infrastructure of the country and conserved much of rural America at bargain expense to taxpayers because he vehemently opposed what he called "the pauperism of the dole."

When it comes to long-term social and economic policy, Roosevelt gets a solid B-plus. As a president of catastrophe-avoidance, and catastrophe was well underway in 1933, FDR deserves a perfect score.

FDR would be as scandalized as any of my three opponents in this exchange at the corruption of his emergency welfare plans to deal with a collapsed financial system and approximately 30 percent unemployment with no direct relief from the federal government when he was inaugurated in 1933. Roosevelt would revile the degeneration of what he founded into a system of taking money from those who earned it and giving it to those who have not—irrespective of merit, in exchange for their votes, with all of his mellifluous and acidulous eloquence.

Roosevelt's greatest economic failings were his reluctant

approval of the Wagner Act (1935), which augmented the ability of organized labor to unionize the workforce, and his recourse to higher taxes on upper incomes in the mid-1930s. He only signed Senator Robert Wagner's bill because he had authorized corporate industry-wide price-fixing and he was trying to raise incomes and prices and reverse deflation. He only raised taxes on the rich (with many available exonerations) to cover his political flank against populist charlatans such as Louisiana's Huey P. Long and the geriatric crank, Francis Townsend (who proposed straight cash payments to Americans like those in the current coronavirus relief legislation).

I had this argument with Jim Powell in the *Wall Street Journal* about 12 years ago. He objected to the Tennessee Valley Authority, which brought rural electrification and flood and drought control and inland navigation to eight states and employed many thousands of unemployed. Powell contended that Roosevelt should have let the impoverished farmers of the region migrate in penury to the cities where they eventually would have enjoyed a higher standard of living. This was a policy prescription not easily distinguishable from Stalin's contemporary slaughter of the kulaks, and is un-American.

What motivated me on Presidents' Day was the Levin-Folsom agreement that these workfare projects of Roosevelt's were a "quid pro quo" (in the brief pendency of that expression's odium because of the [Ukraine nonsense](#)), as Roosevelt caused the Congress to allocate the funds and the beneficiary-states understood that the funding would dry up if they didn't vote for Roosevelt. This was unutterable nonsense and the TVA has flourished under fourteen consecutive presidents, seven of them Republicans. These retroactive quarterbacks have never suggested any serious alternatives to what Roosevelt did and no significant part of his domestic legislation has been seriously altered except taxes, and it took until John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson (both disciples of FDR), to enact the late recognition of how stimulating tax reductions

can be.

Economics is a less dismal science than it was when Herbert Hoover was grimly raising taxes to deal with the Great Depression. When it comes to long-term social and economic policy, Roosevelt gets a solid B-plus. As a president of catastrophe-avoidance, and catastrophe was well underway in 1933, FDR deserves a perfect score.

The entire financial system had collapsed, the banks and stock and commodity exchanges had all closed *sine die*, (except for two states where bank withdrawals could not exceed ten dollars). Roosevelt acknowledged that the New Deal would, and did, make many mistakes, but it saved the country. That was what he was elected to do, and he went on, with Churchill, to save the Western world, retaining the White House and both houses of Congress through four terms. It is no more just to blame Roosevelt for the shambles of the Great Society and what has followed than it is to blame Thomas Edison for electric fires and Henry Ford for automobile accidents. It is a know-nothing argument and my present interlocutors are *not* know-nothings.

Finally, I have heard Mark Levin enunciate the ghastly fiction that Roosevelt gave eastern Europe away to Stalin. In fact, he forced the Normandy landings at least a year ahead of when Churchill wanted them, rejected the mad British idea of charging up the Adriatic instead, and thus saved France and most of Germany for the West, enabling us to win the Cold War, all of whose principal institutions (the Marshall Plan and NATO) were devised by the strategic team bequeathed by Roosevelt to Truman—Marshall, Acheson, Eisenhower, Kennan, and Bohlen, etc. I commend to Levin chapter 24 of my Roosevelt book the next time he feels the Yalta myth congesting his mental faculties.

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