

Roosevelt on Roosevelt: Nicholas Roosevelt's Views on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and His New Deal¹

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Franklin Delano Roosevelt has been the subject of hundreds of books and probably thousand of journal articles in the past eighty years. This is obvious since, aside from earlier government posts and his governorship in New York, he was the longest serving U.S. president and he was in the White House under unprecedented circumstances: he had to face economic depression and worldwide conflagration. During the New Deal and World War II years he reformed the federal government to a considerable degree and left a legacy palpable even today. His long shadow cast over predecessors is understandable in light of the overwhelming consensus that he managed both crises well and left his indelible mark on both the domestic political landscape and on the foreign policy practice of the United States. American historians regularly give him high grades when assessing the presidents so far.² Since he died in office in April 1945, he had no time to write memoirs, he had no diaries, so the public is left with his public papers and messages and the plethora of private letters he wrote to and received from others.

In light of the aforementioned facts, it is worth taking a closer look at a so far unstudied, mainly epistolary, relationship between two Roosevelts. Although Franklin D. Roosevelt is one of the most scrutinized presidents and, next to Theodore Roosevelt, the most famous and studied Roosevelt, Nicholas Roosevelt was also a well-known person in the first half of the twentieth century albeit a lightweight compared to the two presidents of the same family name.

Nicholas Roosevelt was born among favorable circumstances on June 12, 1893, in New York City. His father, James West Roosevelt (1858–1896), was first cousin and close friend of Theodore Roosevelt, was a well-known doctor, hospital director, and member of many medical societies. He married Laura Henrietta d'Oremieux (1858–1945) in 1884. She was a descendant of Oliver Wolcott, Sr.,

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2 As an average result of such major surveys, Franklin Roosevelt has the distinguished 2nd or 3rd overall place. See, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_rankings_of_presidents_of_the_United_States#Scholar_survey_summary, accessed April 25, 2022.

(1726–1797) one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, while his son, Oliver Wolcott, Jr., (1760–1833) held the post of secretary of state under George Washington and John Adams, between 1795 and 1800. N. Roosevelt's maternal grandmother was Laura Wolcott Gibbs, whose father was Colonel George Gibbs of Rhode Island, and mother Laura Wolcott, daughter of Oliver Wolcott, Jr. The couple had five children, two of whom died while in childhood. The youngest child was Nicholas Roosevelt, who, at the age of three, found himself without a father who prematurely died of pneumonia. From then on he basically was brought up under the watch of Theodore Roosevelt, which experience left an indelible mark on his life and worldview. Nicholas inherited a liberal-conservative worldview and a lifelong commitment to the Republican Party.

Nicholas Roosevelt had a momentous and varied career. He served as an attaché at the American Embassy in Paris for two years during World War I, and as secretary to the American mission to Spain in 1916–1917. At the time of the armistice he served in the rank of captain, and joined the Coolidge Mission as such in the last days of 1918. After the Peace Conference, he worked as a foreign correspondent and editorial writer for the *New York Times* (1921–1923), then for the *New York Herald Tribune* as an editorial writer (1923–1942); in 1944 he went back to the *New York Times* as assistant editor. In 1930, President Herbert Hoover appointed Roosevelt to serve as Vice-Governor to the Philippines, but he was released from the post after a few months due to nation-wide protests by Filipinos, who were upset about Roosevelt's depiction of their country and people in one of his earlier books.³ Shortly after he left his post in the Philippines he was named minister to Hungary. This appointment meant the pinnacle of his career, and he stayed in Budapest two and a half years (1930–1933) during the worst years of the Great Depression, and he only resigned because his distant relative, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat, had won the presidency. After the diplomatic stint in Europe, Nicholas Roosevelt returned to journalism as an editorial writer for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Roosevelt was a prolific author outside the newspaper world, and wrote twelve books altogether including his autobiography, *A Front Row Seat*, which was published in 1953. He served in the Office of War Information during World War II, where he was responsible for propaganda activities. After the war he soon resigned from journalism and resided at Big Sur, California, with his wife, Tirzah Maris Gates (1906–1961), but the couple had no children. In his later life he devoted much time and

3 Nicholas Roosevelt, *The Philippines, A Treasure and a Problem*, New York: J. H. Sears & Company, Inc., 1926.

energy to cooking and conservationism on which topics he published books. Nicholas Roosevelt died in 1982.⁴

Nicholas Roosevelt all his life felt that he was important, or wished himself to be seen in such a role. A smart and educated man, he was utterly self-confident in his judgment, seldom thought that his opinions were not the right ones, and his many written texts carried the voice of omniscience. This type of egotism often broke through his personal letters and diaries as well. His relationship with Franklin Roosevelt can be said to be friendly, what can be expected between distant relatives, though admittedly Nicholas Roosevelt's "contacts with F.D.R. had never been close."⁵ To be sure, both of them enjoyed being in the limelight—but Franklin got a much bigger share of it.

Being a life-long Republican, Nicholas Roosevelt often criticized FDR's New Deal and its related big government policies, but the relationship and the recognition of FDR was far more complex. Not only were they relatives, however distant, but N. Roosevelt resigned his ministerial post in Hungary, which FDR accepted, and for a short time FDR was Nicholas Roosevelt's boss, quite detached, while the latter served in the Office of War Information in the middle of World War II. There are two major ways to look at how N. Roosevelt looked at and evaluated FDR's work and personality. One is the various printed texts that he devoted to Franklin Roosevelt's presidential years, especially what regarded the New Deal. The other is the private sphere—diary entries and personal letters where he expressed opinion concerning the work of the 32nd president. As it will be presented, there was ample criticism, mainly for the domestic policy of FDR, while in the foreign policy domain, N. Roosevelt found more to applaud.

The first known letters are from the time when Franklin Roosevelt was the Democratic governor of New York State. He assumed office on January 1, 1929, which seemed for the ambitious politician as a suitable springboard to a possible presidency sometime later.⁶ The two met in the summer of 1928, and Nicholas Roosevelt was quite enthusiastic about Franklin. "What a fine fellow he is, so intelligent and cultivated, and with so much character."⁷ Therefore, FDR's famous

4 For the bibliographical data, see, Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, 3–28; "Nicholas Roosevelt is Dead; Writer and Diplomat Was 88," *New York Times*, February 17, 1982.

5 Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, 222.

6 On FDR's governorship, see, Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, New York. Random House, 2007, 223–246. Perhaps somewhat unfortunately but understandably, FDR's tenure at Albany has never become the focus of historians.

7 N. Roosevelt to Laura Henrietta d'Oremieulx, August 31, 1928, Box 12, Roosevelt, Franklin D., Nicholas Roosevelt Papers, Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Libraries, USA.

personal magic must have worked on the younger Roosevelt. But there was more. Despite the fact that Nicholas Roosevelt was a proud Republican, he actually voted for FDR in the race for the governorship. He believed that “You have the greatest opportunity of any Democrat in years to do something for your party – which doesn’t interest me – and for your country – which does interest me. If you will speak out vigorously and fairly, without truckling to the peanut politicians, you will go far.”⁸ The central point of comparison for Nicholas Roosevelt was Theodore Roosevelt, of course. No matter how much he idolized that cousin in his younger years, however, by now he had understood that more tact was needed in order to win political offices than the famous Teddy had displayed. That is why he warned FDR in the abovementioned style. FDR appreciated Nicholas Roosevelt’s letter and the tone of it, and in response he expressed his hope “that you will keep on writing me in just the same way whenever you want to.”⁹ This was an invitation that a man with an oversized ego could not refuse, and time and again he did write to FDR on various issues. Sometimes it was family history, but more often than not it pertained to American domestic and foreign policy. They also changed ideas on conservation policy, another lifelong passion of Nicholas Roosevelt that he inherited to a large degree from TR.

In 1930, for instance, the letters touched upon the ongoing London Naval Conference and the question of a possible future presidency for FDR. While regarding the Conference FDR was more optimistic than dissatisfied, as for a future bid for the presidency, he was not yet committed. Nicholas Roosevelt warned him not to let himself be talked into running in 1932 and advised that he talk to him, Nicholas Roosevelt, first and decide only then.¹⁰ It is a rather strange proposition and one wonders what NR thought as to what advice he could give to FDR on whether the latter should or should not run two years hence. In any way, as a seasoned politician would do, FDR avoided answering the question straight. Instead, he complained that 1932 had “become a positive nightmare to me and the whole family,” and he wanted to focus on his current job.¹¹ It is true that Democrats in general and FDR in particular thought only in 1936 would he have a chance. However, already at this time—the first months of the recession-soon-to-become-depression—it was clear that there indeed was a chance of taking the White House back from the Republicans. But it was a preposterous notion that

8 N. Roosevelt to F. D. Roosevelt, January 15, 1929, Box 11, Roosevelt, Franklin D., Nicholas Roosevelt Papers.

9 FDR to N. Roosevelt, January 28, 1929, Ibid.

10 N. Roosevelt to FDR, April 30, 1930, Box 11, Folder, Roosevelt, Nicholas, 1913–1920, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, USA.

11 FDR to N. Roosevelt, May 19, 1930, Ibid.

Nicholas Roosevelt ought to explain the dangers of running for the highest office, and, even more absurd, dissuade FDR from it.

In the fall of 1930 Nicholas Roosevelt was appointed to be minister to Hungary. This goes to show that he was a somewhat important figure in Republican circles. He would have been Vice-Governor General to the Philippines—with the help of Henry L. Stimson, former Governor General there and the new Secretary of State under Herbert Hoover—but the plan fell through when there was protests against N. Roosevelt in the Philippines. He had written a book a few years earlier on the archipelago, *The Philippines. A Treasure and A Problem*, 1926. The book's sentiment was condescending toward the Filipino people, and argued that the American system was not the best for these people since they were not ready for such a governmental system for various reasons, especially because they are not familiar with democracy. The book proved to be an affront to many Filipinos, and in the wake of his appointment to the vice-governorship, such a fervent wave of protests unfolded that Hoover decided against sending him. But he was soon appointed to represent the United States in Hungary. During these years the letters between the two Roosevelts came to a virtual halt.

The only time they exchanged letters was in early 1932—when the shadows of the presidential campaign were looming ever larger. Although FDR played down his possible nomination by the Democratic Party and showed disinterestedness in getting it, and, what is more, described the presidency as “the most difficult and thoroughly annoying job in the world,” his ambition was clearly to become president.¹² Concrete proof that family ties, however different, played a positive role between the two Roosevelts, despite their party affiliation, is that FDR asked Nicholas Roosevelt to take some part in the campaign “if, by some lucky or unlucky chance, I should be the Democratic nominee.”¹³

Of course, Franklin Roosevelt not only secured his party's nomination but went on to win the presidency against an embattled Hoover in a landslide victory on November 8, 1932. N. Roosevelt obviously congratulated the president-elect the very next day (because he was stationed in Budapest, he could not do this on the day of the election). The letter he sent was correct from all angles: “I am proud of you for the sake of the family, and that because of this as well as because of my personal feelings toward you I wish you the best of good luck and success in the trying years that are ahead of you.” Then he added that he felt this way “despite the fact that I am a Republican and a Hoover man,” he would “doubtless continue to

12 F. D. Roosevelt to N. Roosevelt, January 25, 1932, Box 69, Folder, Roosevelt, Nicholas, 1913–1920, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

13 Ibid.

differ with you in many things as I have done in the past.”¹⁴ He also emphasized that he would not seek political favors for anyone or be a vehicle for any such demands. As was the tradition, Nicholas Roosevelt turned in his resignation to the new president who accepted it. This was only natural, since they represented opposing political parties, and there was a long line of people waiting to be paid for their political and financial contributions in the campaign.

When Nicholas Roosevelt had returned to the US, he paid a visit to the White House. This was not self-evident, since Hungary was not an important post for the United States. This went to show the mutual appreciation to each other and perhaps also the will to feel importance on part of Nicholas Roosevelt. In any case he visited, and in typical FDR fashion, he was to come with bathing suit and have a swim at the presidential pool. This was clearly not standard procedure for a returning minister to report on his experiences, but after all, these two men had had a positive relationship. N. Roosevelt chronicled the meeting in a draft that found its way into his memoirs twenty years later. It is not recorded what the two were talking about, but probably it was more small talk than substantial political conversation, though FDR wrote to N. Roosevelt’s mother that Nicholas “did a splendid piece of work in Budapest and I am proud of him.”¹⁵ It is the impression that Franklin had on Nicholas Roosevelt that is worth repeating here: “Vigorous, charming, plausible, he was full of the fun of life... I watched his handsome head over the surface of the pool and listened to his genial comments... Here was buoyancy of spirit, magnetism, and restlessness like T.R.’s. But where T.R.’s knowledge as deep and his comments trenchant this altogether charming swimmer seemed to touch only the surface.”¹⁶ This strengthens the image that has been so often tied to FDR: youthful, booming with energy, almost nonchalant, all this despite, or on account of, his being forced to live out his life in a wheelchair.

With Franklin Roosevelt assuming the executive office in March 1933, and launching the first phase of his New Deal to tackle the economic depression, Nicholas Roosevelt was applauding. He was “enormously pleased with the way he has taken hold of things and that I think he has got off to a splendid start.”¹⁷ Simply, after the dispassionate and languid response on Hoover’s part, now it was “a relief to see

14 N. Roosevelt to F. D. Roosevelt, November 9, 1932, Box 11, Roosevelt, Franklin D., Nicholas Roosevelt Papers.

15 F. D. Roosevelt to Laura Henrietta d’Oremieux, June 25, 1933, Box 11, Roosevelt, Franklin D., Nicholas Roosevelt Papers.

16 Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, 221.

17 N. Roosevelt to Louis Howe, March 22, 1933. Howe passed the letter on to FDR on April 22, 1933, Folder, Roosevelt, Nicholas, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s, Papers as President, Official Files, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

somebody at the helm again who is not afraid to be a leader.”¹⁸ To his own mother he put it this way: “One feels that he has what poor Hoover lacked, and what the country so much needs—leadership. It looks as if he would do much to restore our confidence again.”¹⁹ Indeed, the historical analysis confirms that vigorous action was needed in order to provide some help for the structure of the American economy and even more importantly, for the American people in dire straits.

Basically, at least during the first year of FDR’s first term, Nicholas Roosevelt can be said to have been a zealous supporter of the president’s policies. For example, he wrote a personal letter on October 3, 1933, in which he congratulated the president on his address to the American Legion in Chicago.²⁰ But even in the late spring of 1935, he warmly congratulated the president on a historic veto message.²¹ The veto referred to the Patman “Greenback” Bonus Bill, which was the movement for cash payment of the World War adjusted service certificates, which were not due before 1945. FDR vetoed it on May 22, 1935, before the Joint Session of Congress. It was the first time a president had delivered a veto message in person to Congress, and it was also broadcast on radio—that is how N. Roosevelt was able to follow it. Although in both chambers there was a majority to override the presidential veto, in the Senate it did not reach the required two-thirds margin. The veto message was seen as a signal of a resurgent FDR, who had again, after some lackluster efforts in the past six months, found his energy as president.²² Five days after the veto decision, the Supreme Court in the *Schechter* case invalidated the National Industry Recovery Act (NIRA), the backbone of the New Deal. In Arthur Schlesinger’s judgment, with these two events, “Franklin Roosevelt returned to the game of leadership.”²³

18 Ibid.

19 N. Roosevelt to Mrs. J. West Roosevelt, March 10, 1933, Folder: Roosevelt, Mrs. J. West (mother) 1930–1933, Box 12, Nicholas Roosevelt Papers.

20 Folder: Roosevelt, Nicholas, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s, Papers as President, Official Files, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. In fact, N. Roosevelt visited FDR on October 29, and December 12, 1934, on both occasions for a fifteen-minute talk—the regular allocated time for visitors. (<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/daybyday/daylog/october-29th-1934/> and <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/daybyday/daylog/december-12th-1934/>, accessed April 26, 2022.

21 N. Roosevelt to FDR, May 22, 1935, Folder, Roosevelt, Nicholas, Papers as President, President’s Personal Files, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

22 See, Turner Catledge, “War Veterans and Bonus Politics,” *Current History* (1916–1940), Vol. 42, no. 4 (July 1935), 360; Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR: The New Deal Years, 1933–1937. A History*, New York: Random House, 1979, 513–514; for the text of the veto message, see, Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 4, New York: Random House, 1938, 182–193.

23 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960, 290. Indeed, six weeks later Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, the Wagner Act, which passed Supreme Court scrutiny.

In sharp contrast to the First Hundred Days in 1933, with the later phases of the New Deal, however, Nicholas Roosevelt started to sour on his distant cousin and his policies.²⁴ He never shied away from declaring that there was a difference of worldview between the two of them. This was wholly expected. Nicholas Roosevelt was a lifelong Republican, brought up in the TR household where he inhaled the basics of a reform-minded conservative take on politics. Also, while Nicholas Roosevelt belonged to the Oyster Bay branch of the family on Long Island, FDR was the heir to the Hyde Park branch. This latter point, however, did not create necessary friction between these two Roosevelts; but FDR's policies did. The *New York Herald Tribune*, for which NR worked, continually attacked the New Deal as a socialist undertaking and the mocking of American traditions.

The allocated space does not allow to make a detailed analysis of Nicholas Roosevelt's articles concerning FDR and his New Deal, but a few examples will suffice to show the antagonism between what the president represented—both as a politician and his policies—and what Nicholas Roosevelt thought would be more beneficial for the United States.

The first serious salvo was fired in the fall of 1934 on the columns of the *New York Herald Tribune*. This daily was mainly a conservative, Republican-leaning paper.²⁵ In early September NR wanted to believe that Americans were losing their belief in the president because they had realized that FDR did not “know his own mind and that he prefers to listen to inferior and inexperienced advisers rather than to sound and seasoned men.”²⁶ This was more wishful thinking on the part of N. Roosevelt than stable analysis but he was as usual convinced of his own correctness. A month later he returned to the New Deal, and somewhat reluctantly admitted that the policy so far had worked. He said it was a novelty, it was not partisan, it contained promise and hope, and because of “the great personal charm and engaging optimism of Franklin D. Roosevelt the program was virtually irresistible.”²⁷ Frustrating perhaps as it may have been personally for Nicholas Roosevelt, he confessed that the president was “of the most astute politicians in our history.”²⁸ Another three weeks later an additional article of criticism appeared. This time N. Roosevelt took issues with the many broken promises of the Democratic president,

24 For his retrospective and mainly not too positive characterization of FDR and the New Deal, see, Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, 222–234.

25 On the newspaper's history, see, Richard Kluger, *The Paper: the Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986. On the period when N. Roosevelt worked there, see, *Ibid.*, 239–406.

26 Nicholas Roosevelt, “The Real Roosevelt,” *New York Herald Tribune*, September 2, 1934.

27 Nicholas Roosevelt, “Our Tangled Politics,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 7, 1934.

28 *Ibid.*

and that the propaganda machinery was churning out statements that were not factual. “Like leader, like followers,” he concluded.²⁹

In a speech he gave at the University of Virginia in 1935, he one more time found a platform to criticize the New Deal. In the discussion titled “The Constitution and the New Deal,” Nicholas Roosevelt struck a grave and pessimistic tone. Although he admitted that the overall situation had improved since Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency, he saw danger in the highly centralized fashion of the New Deal. His main condemnation was that the economy showed signs of centralized planning similar to socialist undertaking in the Soviet Union thereby stifling free competition and killing off a building block of the American system. “A planned economy,” he argued, “implies changing the American system of government. It means substituting an economic dictatorship for a political democracy. I, for one, regard this as a threat to the very foundations of our civilization.”³⁰

After a longer hiatus he returned even more vehemently to attacking the New Deal. Maybe it had to do something with the fact that it was an election year, but he went as far as calling FDR’s policies under the New Deal a “miscellaneous assortment of half-baked, semi-socialistic, semi-Fascist theories which are lumped together.”³¹ He regularly condemned the New Deal as planned economy, therefore, it was comparable to the Soviet Union’s method, which meant for him it was dictatorial. In other words it was a socialist undertaking and by definition un-American. Yet in another piece he argued that the New Deal had killed off many of the basic American traits, people had become too dependent on government, and the Republicans must turn things around.³² As the election of 1936 was looming ever larger, so intensified the attacks. Nicholas Roosevelt portrayed an apocalyptic future if FDR was re-elected as president. He warned his readers that the “American system is in danger. Do we wish to preserve it, or shall we accept the New Deal substitute which is perilously much like the autocracies in Europe?”³³ All the way until the November elections, he expounded his case against the president. In the heat of the campaign he contributed a series of articles titled “The Roosevelt Record.” Every day he wrote an indictment of government policy and the president’s character as leader. He accused him of misleading and outright

29 Nicholas Roosevelt, “Truth and the New Deal,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 28, 1934.

30 Nicholas Roosevelt, *Two Amazing Years*, Washington, D.C.: American Liberty League, 1935, 14.

31 Nicholas Roosevelt, “Attempt Noted to Lift New Deal From Shoulder of the President,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 26, 1936.

32 Nicholas Roosevelt, “‘Cleaning Up’ After New Deal Held Chief Republican Problem,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 7, 1936.

33 Nicholas Roosevelt, “America Held Facing a Choice Of Federal or Central Power,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 28, 1936.

lying to the American people, preferring the spoils system to the merit system, breaking a score of campaign promises from budget deficit to unemployment figures, making steps toward so strong a centralization of executive power that it was bordering on dictatorship, and keeping people on dole instead and thereby killing individualism.³⁴

Nicholas Roosevelt's criticism of FDR's New Deal perhaps reached its apogee with an article he wrote for *The American Mercury*, a widely recognized intellectual monthly magazine. *The American Mercury* was founded by Henry L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan in 1924, and could boast of "essentially a skeptical, anti-Puritan, urban, and sophisticated editorial viewpoint."³⁵ The historian of the first decade of the magazine stated that it was "truly formidable" and "perhaps no other magazine of comparable circulation has so strongly caught the national imagination."³⁶ Frederick Lewis Allen of *Harper's* in his best-selling book about the 1920s said of Mencken's project that "its contents were explosive... it poured critical acid upon sentimentality and evasion and academic pomposity in books and in life; it lambasted Babbitts, Rotarians, Methodists, and reformers, ridiculed both the religion of Coolidge Prosperity and what Mencken called the 'bilge of idealism,' and looked upon the American scene in general with raucous and profane laughter."³⁷ Another historian of journalism called the magazine "the voice of the skepticism and iconoclasm," an outlet that proved to be "an opinionated and caustic commentator" of the twenties and beyond.³⁸ It had a modest circulation of almost 80,000 before the Great Depression. In October 1936, when a new management decided to cut the price in half, from 50 to 25 cents, the sagging circulation climbed back to the pre-depression years.³⁹ The years of frustration with what he saw as a blatant rape of the American system in the shape of the New Deal had been bubbling up in N. Roosevelt since at least 1934. Now, the magazine proved to be the perfect place for him to vent this frustration and he did not hold back.

34 These articles appeared between October 13 and 26, 1936, *New York Herald Tribune*.

35 M. K. Singleton, *H. L. Mencken and the American Mercury Adventure*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1962, 242.

36 *Ibid.*, 246.

37 Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday. An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*, [1931] New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957, 231.

38 Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1956, 377.

39 On the history of the magazine and its circulation, see, Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 377–381; Singleton, *H. L. Mencken and the American Mercury Adventure*; Hefner, Brooks E. and Edward Timke (eds.), *Circulating American Magazines*, James Madison University, <http://sites.jmu.edu/circulating/>, accessed April 28, 2022.

Actually, two articles of Nicholas Roosevelt's dealing with the president appeared that year in *The American Mercury*. In the June issue, when he wrote on account of the upcoming Republican National Convention where the party's nomination would take place, he criticized mainly FDR. N. Roosevelt described the president as someone who promised everything and to everybody in order to ensure his popularity although he knew very well that he would not deliver on those promises: "His system is simple—to give supporters and enemies alike the impression that he agrees with them 100 per cent," he wrote.⁴⁰ In his view, FDR was "without doubt the glibbest promiser we have ever had," and he believed there was a great demand "for a man of courage and honesty, who will say what he thinks, do what he says, and never hesitate to take a course which threatens unpopularity when to do so is obviously necessary for the nation's welfare."⁴¹ Probably this was the article that Walter Lippmann commented on in a letter to Nicholas Roosevelt. Although the letter was dated May 22, 1936, and the article came out in the June issue, there was no other article by Nicholas Roosevelt in *The American Mercury* earlier that year. In all likelihood the issue came out a few days earlier or the letter was misdated by a month. In any event, Lippmann agreed with what he had read. He had also become disappointed in FDR and, as he wrote to Nicholas Roosevelt, "I am afraid I am going to have to resign my job of defending Franklin from his fifth cousin. I can stand no more of him."⁴²

In the November issue of *The American Mercury* Nicholas Roosevelt further attacked FDR, which was no surprise if one takes into consideration that it was the month of the presidential election. This article is worth quoting in more detail since it was a more scathing criticism on both the president running for reelection and his New Deal program. Already in the beginning he set the tone: "This chameleon-like quality has made it possible for Franklin Delano Roosevelt to pose as a great Liberal at the same time that he is fostering reactionary activities. Because he does not think things through, he is unaware that the New Deal is basically paternalistic. No doubt he sincerely believes he is a plumed Progressive.

40 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Wanted: An Honest President," *The American Mercury*, Vol. 38, no. 150 (June 1936), 196.

41 Ibid., 197, 200.

42 Walter Lippmann to Nicholas Roosevelt, May 22, 1936, Folder 1832: Roosevelt, Nicholas (Mr. & Mrs.) (1931–1944), Box 99, Series III, Correspondence, Selected Correspondence, 1931–1974, Walter Lippmann Papers, MS 326 HM 257, Yale Archives. In fact, Lippmann had chosen to change parties and voted for the Republican nominee, Alf Landon, not because he had great hope in him, but because this was his protest vote against FDR. Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1980, 317–319.

Yet he is, in fact, the conscious leader of world reaction in America today.”⁴³ The president had extraordinary “sensitiveness to currents of popular thought,” but his mind was “mercurial rather than profound,” and this was coupled with “supreme self-confidence” in a leader who enjoyed “power for its own sake.”⁴⁴ The major point of attack on the New Deal was that the executive had taken over powers that traditionally did not belong to it and in the process corrupted American democracy: “He has made a rubber stamp of Congress and has established government by decree. All these things tend towards paternalism—and away from the American system.”⁴⁵ Nicholas Roosevelt thought of himself as a traditional Republican progressive—in the Theodore Roosevelt mold. Accordingly, he abhorred what the first four years of the New Deal brought about. He could not stomach the highly centralized government that curbed or took away many states’ rights and, as he judged it, robbed millions of Americans of their rugged individualist streak. After all, he was a Hoover man. A benevolent and paternalistic government with an affable president who deluded people was outright dangerous in his view. In the final analysis, “Mr. Roosevelt has all the ‘front’ of the perfect Liberal. This makes him all the more useful to those reactionaries who, in the name of a New Deal and a More Abundant Life, are following in America the course that has destroyed democratic Liberalism in Europe. Mr. Roosevelt has identified himself with the reactionaries. This is why true progressives now oppose him.”⁴⁶

Obviously, the voters had the final say in how they valued the president’s work and the results of the New Deal in the past four years. The 1936 presidential elections was an unprecedented victory for Franklin Roosevelt and his policies: he garnered more than 60% of the popular vote, while in the Electoral College he had 523 votes as opposed to Republican Alf Landon’s 8. Such a landslide victory proved that the people at large were satisfied with the efforts of the federal government working for them, and Nicholas Roosevelt represented only a small elite who on various grounds—mainly intellectual and ideological—opposed the president’s policies.

Naturally, FDR’s “court-packing” plan the next year alienated Nicholas Roosevelt further from the president’s policies. After his landslide victory Franklin Roosevelt announced his plan to increase the number of judges sitting on the Supreme Court to 15 with compulsory retirement at 70 years of age. The move

43 Nicholas Roosevelt, “Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” *The American Mercury*, Vol. 39, no. 155 (November 1936), 329.

44 *Ibid.*, 329, 330.

45 *Ibid.*, 330.

46 *Ibid.*, 331.

was unmistakably an effort to ensure that the composition of the highest court would be changed until it became more liberal, and the practice of the past two years would be curbed during which the Supreme Court had struck down many major New Deal pieces of legislation. There was a widespread outcry against what many interpreted as changing the Constitution in order to suit the executive's wishes. Nicholas Roosevelt joined this chorus. Already in January, when the first hint came from the White House that there was a plan afoot to overhaul the Supreme Court, N. Roosevelt charged right away that such a scheme was against the Constitution and the political traditions of the country.⁴⁷ He one more time attacked FDR's character in cooking up this plan to alter the Supreme Court. He wrote that "indirection, lack of candor, readiness to ignore promises, and a lighthearted unwillingness to consider the far-reaching effects of his proposals are characteristics of Mr. Roosevelt's mental processes."⁴⁸ Reforms were one thing, and, in the Theodore Roosevelt fashion, Nicholas Roosevelt believed in them. Actually, in many a piece he scourged the Republican Party to be more up to date and find certain renewal if it wanted to fight FDR and the Democratic Party in a successful way. But reforms and changing the Constitution by decree were two very different things for Nicholas Roosevelt. No wonder he interpreted this latest move on part of the reelected president as harmful and warned his readers that "democracy is in grave danger in this country."⁴⁹ In the end, while in July the Senate struck down the "court-packing" bill, the Supreme Court started to judge the various New Deal bills in a more liberal way, and Roosevelt did not need to resort to extraordinary measures, but he still clearly suffered a political setback. But victory was his in the long run: during his long presidency the composition of the federal Supreme Court became overwhelmingly liberal, which proved to be a major ingredient in establishing the welfare state in the United States.⁵⁰

It must also quickly be mentioned that when it came to foreign policy, Nicholas Roosevelt held his distant cousin in a much higher esteem. Not everything was according to his taste though in this field either. He criticized FDR's Russian policy,

47 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Roosevelt 'Hint' to Court Held Misconception of Its Function," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 17, 1937.

48 Nicholas Roosevelt, "'Smartness' of Court Plan Held Typical of Roosevelt Character," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 14, 1937.

49 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Roosevelt May Be No Dictator, But What of His Successors?" *New York Herald Tribune*, February 21, 1937.

50 In more detail about the "court-packing" plan, see, Leonard Baker, *Back to Back. The Duel between FDR and the Supreme Court*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967; William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Supreme Court Reborn. The Constitutional Revolution in the Age of Roosevelt*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 82–162.

for example, especially the recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933.⁵¹ But when it came to preparedness, he was in accordance with the president. Nicholas Roosevelt himself preached the logic of stronger naval force needed to deter any future threat, which was similar to what, albeit cautiously, Franklin Roosevelt did in the second half of the 1930s.⁵² In the wake of FDR's South American trip, then, Nicholas Roosevelt wrote in a different spirit than earlier that year. The presidential trip lasted between November 17 and December 15, 1937, and it was to pick up and strengthen the "good neighbor policy" with Latin American countries, which he declared in his inauguration address in March 1933. Also, the conference in Buenos Aires was meant to build a quasi coalition for future exigencies in light of the worsening situation in Europe and to establish the bases of a hemispheric defense mechanism. Parallel to the conference in Argentina, the Anti-Comintern Pact was signed between Germany and Japan, which added further impetus to the idea of collective security in the Americas.⁵³ Nicholas Roosevelt, for his part, praised this step on FDR's part. He found a lot to commend in the president's realism in trying to be prepared for any situation and building up the navy.⁵⁴ Sometime earlier he found it important to write a personal letter to the president as well. In this he pointed out that "Even those of us who have been so much out of sympathy with the New Deal methods cannot but recognize that your Latin American policy has been, in the main, excellent."⁵⁵ To be fair, then, Nicholas Roosevelt paid dues if he felt they were merited.

And in the end World War II did break out, so the United States and the president had to react to the dangerous international situation. Nicholas Roosevelt one more time held FDR responsible if the latter did not do what he expected of him. But at the outbreak of hostilities he had praise again. He appreciated FDR's fireside chat of September 3, 1939, in which the president declared US neutrality but stressed that individual conscience demanded taking sides, however cautiously. He therefore established America's role in the first phase of the war.⁵⁶ But afterwards, in a score of articles up until Pearl Harbor, Nicholas Roosevelt mostly criticized

51 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Unrecognizing Russia," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 7, 1935.

52 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Show of Naval Might Is Held Essential to Guard Commerce," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 16, 1936.

53 On FDR's Good Neighbor policy and his trip to South America, see, Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt. A Rendezvous with History*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990, 209–220.

54 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Roosevelt Navy Policy Enables U.S. to Dictate Its Own Neutrality," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 5, 1936.

55 N. Roosevelt to FDR, December 6, 1936, Folder, Roosevelt, Nicholas, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's, Papers as President, President's Personal Files, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

56 Nicholas Roosevelt, "The President's Appeal," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 5, 1939.

the president. He attacked the president's personal diplomacy, which prevented everybody else from knowing the whole picture, and which practice he did not find democratic.⁵⁷ But this became worse, since FDR seemed to zigzag and showed "his inability to follow a simple course consistently." Nicholas Roosevelt considered this "one of his greatest failures in domestic as in foreign affairs."⁵⁸ When, however, the question of building up the Navy and modernizing the Army came to the foreground, Nicholas Roosevelt once more found himself praising FDR.⁵⁹ Still, the general tone of his articles remained critical, mainly on account of the preparedness program, which he judged chaotic.⁶⁰

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the United States became a belligerent power in World War II. From then on the nation was one in the herculean effort to devote all its energy to defeat the enemy. One aspect of how to fight the war in a country that had been traditionally isolationist was the careful use of propaganda. In order to coordinate this effort, by executive order in June 1942, Roosevelt called into being a large-scale propaganda effort for the remainder of the war. The Office of War Information was the mainly civilian propaganda arm of the US government during the next three years.⁶¹ The OWI was a motley crew of thousands of people: there were journalists, printers, advertisers, playwrights, film makers, actors, radio broadcasters, managers, and academics—most of them liberal in outlook. Nicholas Roosevelt chose to work for this organization out of patriotic duty. In fact, soon after the United States had become a party to the war, he offered his services to the president, who appreciated the initiative.⁶² Nicholas Roosevelt was appointed to a post of deputy director of the News Bureau concerning military information in December 1942.

In his memoirs, Nicholas Roosevelt, a few years after the death of FDR, still judged the New Deal in a negative light. He did not question the necessity of quick and bold steps on part of the president; but his main contention was that the "New Deal

57 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Personal Diplomacy," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 31, 1940.

58 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Bungled Diplomacy," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1940.

59 Nicholas Roosevelt, "War Marches Near," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 14, 1940.

60 Nicholas Roosevelt, "Our Galloping President," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 20, 1940.

61 Some of the most important books and articles concerning the OWI during World War II are Lester G. Hawkins and George S. Pettee, "OWI: Organization and Problems," *Public Opinion Quarterly* vol. 7 no. 1 (Spring 1943): 15–33; Sydney Weinberg, "What to Tell America: The Writer's Quarrel in the OWI," *Journal of American History* vol. 55 no. 1 (June 1968): 73–89; Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942–1945*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978; Clayton D. Laurie, *The Propaganda Warriors: America's Crusade Against Nazi Germany*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

62 F. D. Roosevelt to N. Roosevelt, January 12, 1942, Box 11, Roosevelt, Franklin D., Nicholas Roosevelt Papers.

technique was basically changing the American political system by greatly enhancing the power of the executive branch.”⁶³ He called his distant cousin “the greatest political snake charmer in American history,” who was “the ablest politician who ever occupied the White House.”⁶⁴ According to Nicholas Roosevelt, FDR’s genius “lay in mastery of the art of politics and in ability to hold the love of people.”⁶⁵ He wrote his memoirs as the New Deal order started to come to its peak in the early 1950s, and the welfare state was made palpable reality for tens of millions of Americans and a steady middle class came into being. But Nicholas Roosevelt stubbornly refused to admit its advantages. He looked back longingly to a less centralized version of American government, and almost a hundred years later the majority of Republican voters were singing the same tune as Nicholas Roosevelt did when he was attacking Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal.

63 Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, 224.

64 Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, 227.

65 Nicholas Roosevelt, *A Front Row Seat*, 231.