Written by **John J. Dwyer** on January 21, 2014

FDR vs. Lindbergh: Setting the Record Straight

U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (left photo) and American aviator Charles Lindbergh were the two greatest American icons of the first half of the 20th century. One led America throughout the Great Depression and WWII; the other gained fame when he risked his life to be the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, crossing between New York and Paris.

According to major media and many history books, President Roosevelt became more and more a statesman in office after being elected, and was largely responsible for America recovering from the Great Depression and for the Allies winning WWII, consequently spreading "democracy" throughout the world. Yet Lindbergh's life after gaining public prominence was a study in wreck and ruin, with his son being kidnapped and murdered and Lindbergh becoming a speaker for an "isolationist" movement.

But the actual histories of the men suggest that "history" is often little more than propaganda that has been oft repeated. An accounting of the quality of the men's judgments, their standards of behavior in interpersonal conflicts, and their personal accomplishments makes it logical that American history should, instead, laud Lindbergh while recoiling from Roosevelt.

Into Acclaim and Controversy

Modern Americans can scarcely imagine the emotion and awe with which peoples across the world regarded Lindbergh, who was widely christened "The Lone Eagle" following his pioneer 1927 transatlantic solo flight in the *Spirit of St. Louis*, just two decades after the first flight in history. Six world-renowned aviators had already died trying to accomplish the epic feat. When the shy, soft-spoken, boyishly handsome 25-year-old Midwesterner did it, his fame soared to greater heights perhaps than that of the astronauts who landed on the moon in a later generation. As chronicled in James P. Duffy's *Lindbergh vs. Roosevelt: The Rivalry That Divided America*, hundreds of thousands of Parisians cheered him on. Thousands of police and 5,000 soldiers restrained crowds from him in Brussels. The English king and U.S. President Calvin Coolidge received him. *Time* magazine named him its first "Man of the Year."

When his infant son was kidnapped and murdered in 1932, it was America's crime of the century. Many considered it the worst crime since the crucifixion of Christ. The heart of the country beat as one with Charles Lindbergh and his brilliant, lovely wife, Anne.

Roosevelt's rise to the national and international stage was not as sudden. He capitalized on the fact that his distant cousin Theodore Roosevelt was one of the most admired U.S. presidents and managed to become governor of New York. After winning two gubernatorial terms, "FDR" parlayed his own handsome visage, galvanizing charisma, and message of hope for Great Depression-ravaged America into the presidency in 1933 — and soon came into conflict with Lindbergh.

Lindbergh had never pursued political causes and had retreated with Anne from public view — and the vulture-like pursuit of the media — following the staggering loss of their son, but then Roosevelt, riding a historic wave of success and popularity, issued an executive order in early 1934 that outlawed an entire industry, private airline mail carrying. Instead, Roosevelt determined, the U.S. military would provide the air transportation for delivering air mail. Democrat Roosevelt charged that Republican companies were price- and route-fixing. (The Washington, D.C., Court of Appeals later ruled his actions arbitrary and without due process of law.) The Lone Eagle burst back into the limelight with a brief letter to the president protesting his actions. Lindbergh declared them "unwarranted and contrary to American principles" in their wielding of federal government power over the private sector whose production funded that government.

Round One was under way between two of the most legendary Americans in history, and the air mail controversy morphed overnight into an epic Roosevelt vs. Lindbergh showdown. Brave army pilots, ill trained for their new mail-carrying mission and flying planes far inferior to the airlines' (one commercial liner, for instance, could carry the load of six army planes) and inadequate for either the pitch black of night or the freezing, snow-blown winter, began immediately to perish.

As the body count rose to 12 and accidents to 66, masses of air mail were delayed or never delivered, and public fury mounted at the administration. Roosevelt ignored the advice of friends and enemies, business people, military leaders, and government officials alike to reinstate private mail delivery and, instead, orchestrated a feverish, behind-the-scenes campaign to redirect blame for the burgeoning disaster, including against Lindbergh, whose statements legitimized the theretofore-unheard-of phenomenon of wide public criticism of Roosevelt. FDR attempted to portray Lindbergh as a tool of the airlines. "Don't worry about Lindbergh," he scowled to an aide. "We will get that fair-haired boy."

However, the president soon had to admit defeat and ask Congress to pass legislation returning airmail service to private carriers, reversing his action of barely 90 days before.

Roosevelt ally Henry "Hap" Arnold, later five-star commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces during WWII, summarized the fiasco: "Within two weeks we were forced to realize that although the 'will to do' might get the job done, the price of our doing it was equal to the sacrifice of a wartime combat operation. Courage alone could not substitute for years of cross-country experience; for properly equipped airplanes; and for suitable blind flying instruments, such as the regular air-line mail pilots were using."

New Deal Failure

Roosevelt's tenure in office reinforced the perception that his need to be considered right trumped his desires to actually get things right.

His famed "first hundred days," contrary to many of his campaign promises about avoiding the centralization of government power, unleashed an unparalleled blizzard of legislation in which the federal government sought to correct the supposed failures of the capitalistic system — through the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the National Industrial Recovery Act, and

many other new laws. “It is common sense to take a method and try it,” he explained. “If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.” The nation had just suffered through three years of Herbert Hoover’s ineffectual post-stock market crash economic schemes, and the unemployment rate stood at over 23 percent at Roosevelt’s inauguration, so the majority of citizens were willing to give him a chance.

Though the realization gradually dawned on Roosevelt and his minions that no amount of constitutionally questionable New Deal programs and Machiavellian presidential scheming could end the Depression, Roosevelt kept his programs going full steam ahead. Near the end of Roosevelt’s second term, Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau, a key New Deal architect, penned this startling confession regarding the administration’s failure: “We have tried spending money. We are spending more than we have ever spent before and it does not work. And I have just one interest, and now if I am wrong somebody else can have my job. I want to see this country prosper. I want to see people get a job. I want to see people get enough to eat. We have never made good on our promises. I say after eight years of this administration, we have just as much unemployment as when we started. And enormous debt to boot.”

As nations on nearly every continent emerged from the economic cataclysm, U.S. unemployment skyrocketed back up to nine million workers in 1939 — 12 million if counting Americans employed at taxpayer-funded “make-work” jobs — a total nearly that of when Roosevelt first won the presidency, and after oceans of New Deal spending.

As the 1930s wound down, Roosevelt’s resolve not to take his hand off the tiller steering America’s economic course was creating the unemployment that would help impel him to push America into another world war and another face-off with Lindbergh.

In September 1939 when Germany and Russia invaded Poland, precipitating WWII, Roosevelt saw his chance to eliminate U.S. unemployment. Amity Schlaes opined in her Depression chronicle *The Forgotten Man*: “A war … would hand to Roosevelt the thing he had always lacked — a chance, quite literally, to provide jobs to the remaining unemployed. On the junket down the Potomac, for example, he could count 6,000 men at work at Langley Field; 12,000 at Portsmouth Navy Yard, where there had been 7,600; and new employment in the military or the prospect of it, for Americans elsewhere. Roosevelt hadn’t known what to do with the extra people in 1938, but now (1940) he did: he could make them soldiers.” Never mind that the private-sector unemployment problem was exacerbated by the economic drag caused by his costly Big Government programs — or that going to war would make government even more expensive.

Roosevelt’s only problem was convincing Americans of the necessity to fight — no easy chore. The American public was disgusted with Europe after it had torn itself to shreds for no legitimate reason in the “Great War,” dragging the United States into the fray to win the fight, then reneged on billions of dollars in war repayments while pillorying the United States as a villainous creditor called “Uncle Shylock” — not to mention America’s 460,000 deaths resulting from that war. The American public had no interest in saving England’s rapacious empire again, or in dealing with European geopolitics.

Roosevelt, again contrary to promises to the electorate, schemed and crafted plans to involve the United States in Europe’s latest war, while Lindbergh worked assiduously to keep America out of the war.

Dragged Into War

Meanwhile, Hitlerite Germany and Imperial Japan surged forward in economic and military expansion mode. They reconquered lost territories, then annexed others to shield themselves from counterattack and mine them for natural resources.

Less than a year after Britain and France declared war on Germany, the Germans had thrown their combined armies off the continent and had taken over western and northern Europe, including France. The British and their new Prime Minister Winston Churchill once again begged America for help in escaping a mess into which they had gotten themselves through pre-war continental alliances.

In the run-up to the 1940 presidential election, Roosevelt sought to outstrip his Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie, with solemn pledges to the public to steer clear of war. "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again," Roosevelt assured American mothers and fathers, "your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars." Yet privately, he sounded a different tune. "Of course, we'll fight if we are attacked," he told staff members. "If somebody attacks us, then it isn't a foreign war, is it?" And he did everything in his power to make sure America was attacked, as the following illustrates.

Indeed, immediately following his third election, Roosevelt accelerated his efforts to guide the United States into the war, all the while assuring the nation of his determination to keep it out.

Political pundit Patrick Buchanan described what now unfolded: "Before the election, Roosevelt had been cautious; now, he was bold, even provocative. He extended the navy's neutrality zone from three hundred miles offshore to the mid-Atlantic and put U.S. troops on Greenland and Iceland. In the spring of 1941 the United States aided the British in the search for the [German ship] *Bismarck* [to sink her]. By July, U.S. naval 'patrols' were being extended to Iceland to protect American ships; British ships were allowed in the convoys. None of this was done with the authorization of Congress."

Roosevelt also dispatched his closest advisor, the staunchly pro-Soviet Harry Hopkins, to England to reassure Churchill: "The President is determined that we shall win the war together. Make no mistake about it. He has sent me here to tell you that at all costs and by all means he will carry you through, no matter what happens to him — there is nothing he will not do so far as he has human power."

After later meeting with Roosevelt, Churchill told his Cabinet that the president was "obviously determined" to come into the war and "said that he [Roosevelt] would wage war [including against German subs anywhere] but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it they could attack the American forces."

Roosevelt also disregarded the congressional Neutrality Acts — passed by Congress and supported by the public, which applied U.S. embargoes of all war materiel to all warring nations and forbid loans or credit to warring parties — creating conditions so that "allies," such as the British, did not have to pay cash for American war materiel, and he championed the Lend Lease Act through Congress. Employing unprecedented presidential power, he "loaned" Britain and later the Soviet Union vast amounts of American supplies, arms, and ammunition. Whether the Soviets, who invaded Poland in concert with the Germans and later enslaved half of Europe and terrorized much of the rest of the world for 50 years following the war, would otherwise have survived the Nazi onslaught against them remains an open question.

And he launched high-level military meetings between the United States and Britain, taking extreme measures to hide them from the American people. In conjunction with the meetings, he conspired with a vast British espionage, propaganda, extortion, and character-assassination operation based in New York

City to influence the nation toward war. He attempted to convince the U.S. public that Hitler intended a "new world order" encompassing the Western Hemisphere. Central and South America, FDR falsely declared, would be reorganized into "five vassal states" under Nazi rule. U.S.-based British spies forged a "secret map" of the fictional German plans for Roosevelt.

Roosevelt loosed ships, such as the U.S.S. *Greer*, on German U-boats in aid of the British. Other American vessels such as the U.S.S. *Niblack* themselves attacked U-boats in waters thousands of miles from the United States.

And while Hitler went to extremes to prevent German attacks on Americans, even forbidding attacks on U.S. ships in self-defense, Roosevelt publicly denounced the Germans for attacking U.S. naval vessels. Key Roosevelt lieutenant Robert Sherwood wrote following the war: "If the isolationists had known the full extent of the secret alliance between the United States and Britain, their demands for impeachment would have rumbled like thunder throughout the land."

Nonetheless, Roosevelt failed to provoke Hitler into committing overt acts of war against American vessels, as the German dictator was determined to avoid a Great War-like two-front European land war. So Roosevelt turned his efforts to the Pacific and the Japanese, to bait them into attacking the United States. Of course, provoking a Japanese attack also provided a back-door strategy to U.S. entry into the war in Europe because of Japan's alliance with Hitler.

The herculean research of World War II Navy veteran Robert B. Stinnett and others provides a sanguinary road map of Roosevelt's efforts in that respect: The president implemented all eight planks of the infamous McCollum memorandum. Authored by Lieutenant Commander Arthur H. McCollum, head of the Far East desk of the Office of Naval Intelligence, these planks advocated actions about which McCollum stated, "If by these means Japan could be led to commit an overt act of war [against the United States], so much the better." They included a new and dramatic U.S. military presence in the Far East; the gradual choking off of all crucial manufacturing elements to Japan by America and its allies; and placement of the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Hawaii, an isolated outpost thousands of miles toward Japan from the American mainland.

Admiral James O. Richardson, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, immediately recognized the jeopardy in which this move placed the fleet and protested so strongly to Roosevelt that the president fired him.

After meeting with the president on October 16, 1941, Republican Secretary of War Henry Stimson, a staunch internationalist and member of the world-government-promoting Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in his diary: "We face the delicate question of the diplomatic fencing to be done so as to be sure Japan is put into the wrong and makes the first bad move — overt move." A diary entry six weeks later following a meeting of the War Cabinet — less than two weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor — clarifies what Stimson meant by "overt move": "The question was how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves." After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Stimson confessed that "my first feeling was of relief … that a crisis had come in a way which would unite all our people." After the war, he added that, "We needed the Japanese to commit the first overt act."

America First

Meanwhile, Lindbergh presciently discerned the gathering dangers to the nation, and began a series of radio broadcasts and public speeches in September 1939 against America's involvement in yet another

European war. In one speech, he issued "a plea for American independence," asking, "Why in this second century of our national existence must we be confronted with the quarrels of the old world that our forefathers left behind when they settled in this country?"

Though he personally disdained public involvement in controversial political issues, he eventually joined America First, the 800,000-strong noninterventionist (but not pacifist) organization, and he crafted a platform comprised of four main elements: 1) an embargo on offensive weapons and munitions to warring nations, 2) the unrestricted sale of purely defensive armaments to anyone who wanted them to protect themselves from attack, 3) the prohibition of American shipping from the belligerent countries of Europe and their danger zones, 4) the refusal of credit to belligerent nations or their agents.

Lindbergh's tenets were intended to ward off another experience like World War I wherein U.S. banks loaned the Allies the funds to buy American munitions and, hence, pushed strongly for American involvement in the war and for Allied victory in order to ensure repayment of their loans.

Still half a year before the U.S. entrance into the war, in one of his most famous speeches, before 25-30,000 people in and around New York City's Madison Square Garden, Lindbergh thundered forth the suspicions of millions of Americans: "We have been led toward war against the opposition of four-fifths of our people." To deafening applause, he continued: "From every section of this country, a cry is rising against this war. But it is a cry that reaches beyond the question of war alone.… It echoes from the very foundations on which our system of government is built. It asks how this situation came about? … It demands an accounting from a government that has led us to war while it promises peace."

Destroy the Messenger

In response to Lindbergh's opposition to the president's aggressive policies, Roosevelt loosed all but the hounds of hell on him, and the media — a media that Lindbergh biographer Scott Berg stated "had grown to resent Lindbergh's uncooperative attitude, [and] instantly revised history." FDR's political allies excoriated the aviator with an armada of untrue accusations. They called him an "isolationist," though he advocated vigorous American commercial trading around the world and urged the United States not to "build a wall around our country and isolate ourselves from contact with the rest of the world." In essence, Lindbergh, like others in the America First Committee, agreed with George Washington's opposition to "permanent alliances," especially with Europe and its "frequent controversies," while trading with all nations.

Roosevelt's allies also called Lindbergh a defeatist and appeaser of Germany, though at the same time Lindbergh managed to gain unprecedented access to the German Luftwaffe (the German air force) and became the first non-German to fly the legendary Messerschmitt 109 fighter plane, and he provided intelligence to the U.S. military about Nazi capabilities. Hap Arnold declared, "Lindbergh gave me the most accurate picture of the Luftwaffe, its equipment, leaders, apparent plans, training methods, and present defects that I had so far received," and Arnold invited him to serve on an elite U.S. military aircraft development board.

Lindbergh was called a Nazi "fellow-traveler," and Roosevelt and others privately said he was a Nazi. Yet Lindbergh spoke and wrote in many venues of his disgust with Nazi excesses and wrongdoing.

He was called an anti-Semite, primarily due, as historian Duffy wrote, "to a single claim he made," in one Des Moines speech, "that Jews were among the influential groups [including the British and the Roosevelt administration] that shaped America's war policies.… Lindbergh never blamed American Jews for their attitude toward the war. To the contrary, even as he criticized Jewish support for war, he

expressed sympathy and understanding for the Jewish position."

Interestingly, whereas Lindbergh's friends — including Jews — and family insisted, in the words of Harry Guggenheim, that he "has never had the slightest anti-Semitic feeling," numerous accounts exist of Roosevelt having such, including by key Jewish aides such as Morgenthau and Henry Ickes.

Roosevelt's forces went after Lindbergh, other non-interventionists, and even critical letter-writers to the White House in additional ways, as Duffy chronicled. These included telephone wiretaps, room listening devices, public smear campaigns, and in general trying "to find some dirt" on them. The president himself initiated a cooperative venture with J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI in which the White House supplied the bureau the names and addresses of the letter senders so that the FBI could provide information on them.

Wartime Exploits

The enduring vindictiveness of Roosevelt evidenced itself in his determination to keep Lindbergh from any military role in the U.S. war effort, despite the aviator's wholehearted support of the war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and his stature as one of the world's foremost aviation experts. Wiser heads eventually prevailed, and Lindbergh's wartime resumé was extraordinary.

He corrected problems in the Army's B-24 Liberator bomber, flew high-altitude test flights in the P-47 Thunderbolt fighter, and conducted dangerous research on combating airborne oxygen blackouts, using himself as guinea pig. At 42 years old — virtually invalid age for a fighter pilot — he flew 50 combat missions in the Pacific. Colonel Charles MacDonald, commander of the famed "Satan's Angels" fighter group, said, "Lindbergh was indefatigable. He flew more missions than was normally expected of a regular combat pilot. He dive-bombed enemy positions, sank barges, and patrolled our landing forces on Noemfoor Island. He was shot at by almost every anti-aircraft gun the Nips [Japanese] had in western New Guinea."

He also increased the bomb load of the Navy's F4U Corsair fighter plane to 4,000 pounds, the heaviest ever carried by the fighter, then personally dropped it on Wotje Island, demolishing a Japanese anti-aircraft gun battery. After he devised how to extend the P-38 Lightning fighter's flight distance by hundreds of miles, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in the Pacific Douglas MacArthur engaged him as a consultant and offered him whatever plane he wished to fly. Lindbergh's discovery of how to improve the P-38's flying distance enabled the fighter plane to escort bombers to the Japanese-held island of Palau, aiding in the capture of the island and leading to its use as a launching pad for MacArthur's triumphant return to the Philippines.

In a head-to-head aerial dogfight with a Japanese group commander, Lindbergh missed crashing head-on with the enemy's plane by five feet and shot it down. Aiding a fellow pilot in another dogfight, he got jumped by a Mitsubishi Zero that fired from directly behind him as he "commended [his] soul to God," but another American fighter shot down the Zero in the nick of time.

Having personally confronted the true horrors of war in the Pacific, though, Lindbergh bitterly denounced it in his private journal: "As the awful truth of the German crimes against the Jewish people came out, here we were, doing the same thing to the Japs." He wrote about the attitudes he encountered: "'They really are lower than beasts. Every one of 'em ought to be exterminated.' How many times I heard American officers in the Pacific say those very words!… And 'Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?'"

He chronicled the shooting of Japanese soldiers attempting to surrender so that other Japanese soldiers

would remain in the jungle and slowly starve; Marines firing on unarmed Japanese swimming ashore at Midway; troops machine-gunning prisoners on a Hollandia airstrip; Australians shoving captured Japanese out of transport planes over the New Guinea mountains; Japanese shinbones carved off for letter openers and pen trays; Japanese heads buried in ant hills "to get them clean for souvenirs"; and "the infantry's favorite occupation" of poking through the mouths of Japanese corpses for gold-filled teeth. He added, "What is barbaric on one side of the earth is still barbaric on the other."

"Judge not that ye be not judged," he continued. "It is not the Germans alone, or the Japs, but the men of all nations to whom this war has brought shame and degradation." He also wrote of the legacy of using violence to solve mankind's ills: lynchings, witch-burnings, "burnings at the stake for the benefit of Christ and God."

In the 1950s, the U.S. Senate approved President Eisenhower's nomination of Lindbergh as a brigadier general in the U.S. Army Reserve.

Legacies

Interestingly, the two great adversaries met in person one time, on April 20, 1939, early in their conflict over the coming war, and even then Lindbergh saw through Roosevelt's façade of charm. Roosevelt invited Lindbergh to his office following circulation of the latter's momentous reports on German aviation. FDR kept Lindbergh waiting 45 minutes, then met with him for 15. Lindbergh wrote of the cordial visit in his journal: "I liked him and feel that I could get along with him well.... But there was something about him I did not trust, something a little too suave, too pleasant, too easy.... It is better to work together as long as we can; yet somehow I have a feeling that it may not be for long."

Despite no animus on the part of Lindbergh toward Roosevelt and Lindbergh's correct discernment of the state of international politics, Roosevelt's campaign to vilify him was largely a success, though Lindbergh was a celebrity in his own right. Thus, Franklin Roosevelt graduated onto the front of textbooks, currency, and best presidents' lists. Charles Lindbergh, meanwhile, won the laurels of hatred and slander reserved for the truest patriot, he who loves his country enough to criticize her for her own good — a lesson that patriots of today know only too well is repeated almost daily in America through the cooperation of likeminded media and politicians.

— Photos of FDR and Lindbergh: AP Images