

“A Great Debate in Every Newspaper”
Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Press, and American Foreign Policy, 1940-1941

Hannah Lepow
Senior Thesis
Department of History, Columbia University

Seminar Instructor: Professor Emma Winter
Second Reader: Professor Alan Brinkley
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Introduction

“News, if unreported, has no impact,” wrote journalist Gay Talese in his history of the *New York Times*, *The Kingdom and the Power*. “It might as well have not happened at all. Thus the journalist is the important ally of the ambitious, he is a lamplighter for stars.”¹ Journalism is perhaps the most important ally of the politician; Walter Lippmann, founding editor of *The New Republic*, seemed to think so when in 1922 he wrote, “The news is the chief source of the opinion by which government now proceeds.”² This was certainly true of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s government. President Roosevelt engaged frequently with the press: he held press conferences twice a week in the Oval Office and developed a rapport with many reporters, joking with them, teasing them, and winning their respect. However Roosevelt struggled with many newspaper publishers. While reporters in the press room were largely friendly towards his administration’s policies, their editors and publishers, who were mostly Republican, influenced press coverage toward their own political point of view.

This was actually helpful to the President, to some degree. Roosevelt used the press to understand American public opinion, and he used his frequent conferences with the press to try to lead that opinion forwards. This is particularly evident in the case of American aid to Great Britain at the beginning of World War II. While the U.S. did not officially involve itself in the war until attacked at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it did begin financial and material aid to Great Britain in 1940. Roosevelt led the charge for these policies – first through the Destroyers for Bases agreement in September 1940 that lent the British 50 U.S. World War I destroyers in exchange for leases on British naval bases in the Americas, and then through the Lend-Lease Act, a loaning of arms and war material that would not have to be repaid until after the war. But

¹ Gay Talese, *The Kingdom and the Power* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966), 2.

² Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6.

the majority of the American people, still in favor of isolationism, were not eager to involve their country even financially in the foreign war, fearing this would lead to military involvement. As Roosevelt endeavored through speeches, Fireside Chats, press conferences, and eventually foreign policy to advocate internationalism, the press informed him of public opinion and, in doing so, acted as a check on his executive power.

Coaxing public opinion from isolationism to internationalism was Roosevelt's task from 1939 to 1941. Historian R. S. Sayers, one of the authors of the official British history of World War II, wrote of this period, "In retrospect the historian may emphasize that American participation was sooner or later inevitable [...] but a nation of millions of people is not brought readily to decisions of this kind."³ There were many factors that contributed to this change in public opinion; this thesis focuses on how these, principally executive power and growing British need, played out between the President, and his proxy for public opinion, the press.

The Power of the President

Roosevelt himself was a dynamic, press-oriented president. He had been president of the *Harvard Crimson* at college, albeit a post of greater social than journalistic distinction at the time.⁴ Taking office in the middle of the Great Depression, he saw himself as a latter-day Jefferson defending the rights of the people against a Hamiltonian minority of wealth and privilege.⁵ As he was running the government on behalf of the large and varied American public, he wanted to both understand the public's perception of its needs as well as educate it and lead the country forward. While previous executives had avoided reporters, Roosevelt welcomed

³ Warren F. Kimball, *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), vi.

⁴ Alan Brinkley, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

⁵ Graham J. White, *FDR and the Press*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), ix.

them into the Oval Office. He did not require the press to submit written questions in advance, as had been President Hoover's practice, and he took the press with him when he went on domestic trips.⁶ To help him in his dealings with the press was Stephen T. Early, himself a reporter before Roosevelt hired him as White House Press Secretary. Early served Roosevelt longer than any other close aide, from the beginning of the New Deal until the President's death – a story he himself had to break. Early was a recognizable Washington figure who held his own daily press conferences.⁷ These two men, who both combined the attributes of politician, editor, and journalist, shaped both public opinion and foreign policy against the backdrop of world political events.

The Power of the Press

The relationship between Roosevelt and the print media has not been studied as often as might be expected for a President who had such an involved and intimate relationship with the press. The majority of the literature on the relationship between the press and this President is at least twenty years old, while most of today's scholarship focuses on the effect on the presidency of digital media, from broadcasting to the Internet. But Roosevelt's relationship with the print media is worthy of in-depth study precisely because there was not a profusion of digital media in his day. During the Roosevelt Administration there was no broadcast journalism to speak of and the radio of the time did not feature commentary. The only outlet for editorialized journalism was newspapers and newsmagazines, which enjoyed a very high readership. From 1920-1935 the total circulation of English-language dailies in the country increased from 27 to 41 million, with

⁶ Betty Houchin Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 27.

⁷ Linda Lottridge Levin, *The Making of FDR: The Story of Stephen T. Early, America's First Modern Press Secretary*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), 13.

an upswing in 1939 after the start of the war in Europe.⁸ Meanwhile the relatively new newsmagazines enjoyed a wide readership as well: the top 20 magazines (both news and other interest) of 1940 had a combined circulation of over 44 million.⁹ When there were so few (compared to today) news organizations covering the President, his relationship with them was necessarily of much greater importance.

This thesis will focus on the coverage of three daily newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Each of these papers enjoyed a high national readership, and Roosevelt had personal – although not always cordial or supportive – relationships with their publishers and reporters. Roosevelt had friendly relations with Adolph Ochs and his successor, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the two publishers of the *New York Times* during Roosevelt’s term in office; he invited Ochs and his wife to stay overnight at the White House, and he and Sulzberger met with some regularity following the outbreak of World War II.¹⁰ Roosevelt occasionally struggled with *Times* reporters – he tended to mockingly refer to the paper’s senior White House correspondent, Arthur Krock, as “Li’l Arthur” in public, and once told Turner Catledge, a Washington-based *Times* reporter junior to Krock, that he should feel free to acquire information directly from the President, without having to go through Krock.¹¹ Still, the *Times* was largely supportive of Roosevelt, though it did not support his 1940 bid for re-election.

The *Washington Post* was also largely supportive – though much more so of the President’s foreign policies than his domestic.¹² Roosevelt called Eugene Meyer, the banker who

⁸ Douglas Waples, “Communications.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 4 (1942): 910.

⁹ Michael G. Carew, *The Power to Persuade: FDR, the Newsmagazines, and Going to War, 1939-1941* (New York: University Press of America, 2005), 205.

¹⁰ White, *FDR and the Press*, 60-61.

¹¹ Talese, *The Kingdom*, 183, 43.

¹² White, *FDR and the Press*, 61.

had bought the paper, a man from “the counting room rather than the news desk,” but Meyer nonetheless offered invaluable assistance to Roosevelt in the realm of foreign affairs. For instance, in early March 1941 – before Lend-Lease had been passed – Meyer divulged to Roosevelt the results of a series of polls commissioned by the *Post* indicating that the transfer of destroyers to the Allies would be approved by 56 percent of the population and only opposed by 26 percent and, furthermore, that men of draft age favored the Lend-Lease Bill.¹³

By comparison, Roosevelt had a very contentious relationship with the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Colonel Robert McCormick. The two had gone to school together at Groton and while McCormick’s paper did not support Roosevelt’s initial bid for election in 1932, the President met with his former schoolmate several times after his election with the hope of establishing a working relationship.¹⁴ But this did not prove fruitful. The conservative and isolationist McCormick disagreed with Roosevelt’s New Deal, particularly the National Recovery Administration, as well as his internationalist foreign policies. Roosevelt in turn baited McCormick; he gave his 1937 “Quarantine” speech in which he advocated internationalism by calling for a need to “quarantine the aggressor nations” in McCormick’s Chicago, mocked the Colonel during his press conferences, and directed Stephen Early to keep a scrapbook of *Tribune* clippings that manifested animus toward the New Deal.¹⁵ Early filled it quickly enough, as McCormick’s paper rarely supported the President.

Historiography

The existing historiography on the relationship between Roosevelt and the press in this period is fairly limited. It comes from two kinds of works: firstly scholarship specifically

¹³ White, *FDR and the Press*, 61.

¹⁴ Richard Norton Smith, *The Colonel* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 319-321.

¹⁵ Smith, *The Colonel*, 327.

devoted to the relationship between the President and the print media over the course of his administrations, and secondly scholarship primarily concerned with Roosevelt's foreign policy. The former focuses on the press at the expense of outside concerns, while the latter only discusses the press tangentially, if at all. For my research I have mostly relied upon secondary source material about Roosevelt's foreign policy (especially Robert Dallek's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* and Warren F. Kimball's *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939-1941*) in conjunction with press conferences, newspaper articles, and histories of the newspapers in question to better portray the connection between the President and the press in this time.

This differs significantly from the existing literature specifically devoted to the relationship between the President and the press. Graham J. White's *FDR and the Press*, the first book dedicated to this relationship, focuses on Roosevelt's attitude towards reporters, editors, and publishers, and ultimately concludes that while the President welcomed press opposition at times, he was generally indifferent to press support as he enjoyed electoral success regardless.¹⁶ White drew his conclusion from his reading of a wide variety of newspapers, but he did not consult Roosevelt's press conferences or his correspondence with publishers. Betty Houchin Winfield did explore these sources, but came to the same conclusion as White in her book, *FDR and the News Media*. Explaining the gap between newspaper support for Roosevelt (the President had the endorsement of only 25 percent of the dailies and 33 percent of the weeklies in 1940) and popular support (the President won 55 percent of the popular vote in 1940), she argued that "the opinion pieces and editorial slants of the American press did not have strong persuasive powers."¹⁷

¹⁶ White, *FDR and the Press*, 153-4.

¹⁷ Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 128.

Both these historians fail to understand the true power of the press. Roosevelt would not have maintained twice weekly press conferences had he not believed in the persuasive power of newspapers and not wanted to be aware of public opinion. Richard W. Steele understood this, focusing almost exclusively on the challenge of overcoming isolationism in his *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941*. Steele's study focused on different types of media, from newspapers to radio to the movies. Precisely because of this, his analysis of the relationship between Roosevelt and the print media – the most important, given that it was the sole branch that delivered an editorial viewpoint at this time – was spotty. While he claimed, “newspapers [...] would never quite fulfill FDR's long-standing quest for an objective vehicle of government views,” this misunderstands the unique character of newspapers at the time: they were far from objective.¹⁸ On the radio the President could speak directly, unedited, to the people; in newspapers and magazines his actions were subject to interpretation first by a reporter and then his editor and publisher. This is exactly what makes the study of the relationship between Roosevelt and the print media so potentially fruitful, not to mention interesting.

Implicit in the existing historiography is the assumption that the relationship between Roosevelt and the press went one way – that the President used the press to influence public opinion. But my research shows that the relationship was a two-way street. Roosevelt used the press as much to learn about public opinion as he did to educate that public opinion. In doing so the President treated the press as a political force in its own right: the fourth estate. He was hardly the first to do so; Thomas Carlyle attributed the term “fourth estate” to Edmund Burke, who first used it in a 1787 parliamentary debate on the opening up of press reporting in Great

¹⁸ Richard W. Steele, *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 98.

Britain's House of Commons.¹⁹ But in recognizing the utility of the press, Roosevelt had a much more reciprocal understanding of the presidency's relationship with it than the literature implies.

My work differs from the existing historiography in both its methodology and its conclusions. I look at three national daily newspapers and approach their coverage chronologically, but in tandem with the interactions that took place between Roosevelt and reporters in press conferences. By recreating the feedback loop between the President and the press – from Roosevelt's press conferences, to their portrayal in the newspapers in question, to how the President in turn reacted to these in his subsequent press conferences or public speeches – this thesis reveals the effect of both the President on the press and the press on the President, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between both political actors.

¹⁹ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 45.

Chapter 1: June-September 1940

The lack of major military operations following Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939, the so-called 'phony war,' led many Americans to believe that the U.S. would not have to involve itself – either by giving aid or sending troops – in the European conflict. Isolationist sentiment was strong in the country at large and the Nazi threat seemed less serious than it had immediately after Great Britain declared war.²⁰ But the events of May 1940 changed everything: Germany's decisive invasion of the Low Countries and France shattered the Phony War. Within six weeks, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and France had fallen, leaving Germany with an uninterrupted path to the English Channel and Great Britain to fight the Axis alone. Roosevelt had been eager to aid the Allies since the beginning of the war but feared the country would not have been with him.²¹ According to a *Fortune* magazine poll in September 1939, between 50 and 60 percent of the public supported aid to England and France, but the majority of this group unequivocally wished to keep the U.S. out of war.²² Roosevelt's public role was thus mostly constrained to monitoring the developments abroad.

In the wake of the fall of France, American support of sales of air force planes to England and France rose to 80 percent, and with such public support Roosevelt started to act behind the scenes.²³ In response to a request from a friend to step up aid to the Allies and publicly identify himself with this aim, he responded triumphantly in a letter of June 7:

I beat you to it! Very many planes are actually on the way to the Allies [...] I am doing everything possible – though I am not talking very much about it because a certain element of the Press, like

²⁰ Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press), 201.

²¹ While in his fireside chat two days after Germany's invasion of Poland Roosevelt promised, "I hope the United States will keep out of this war. I believe that it will. And I give you assurance and reassurance that every effort of your Government will be directed toward that end," on September 1, the eve of the invasion, he had asked the Commerce Department for a program that would allow Americans to sell "certain types of war supplies to friendly nations without violating the [Neutrality] Act." Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 199.

²² Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 201.

²³ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 228.

the Scripps Howard papers, would undoubtedly pervert it, attack it, and confuse the public mind. This is inadvisable even though I am personally well accustomed to it [...] Very soon there will be the simple statement you speak of.²⁴

Just three days later Roosevelt got the chance to make this “simple statement.” While the President was concerned by the movements of Germany and Japan, he was also trying to ensure that Benito Mussolini, the leader of Fascist Italy, kept his country out of the war. On June 10, 1940, this failed when Italy joined the Axis, declared war, and attacked France. On the same day, Roosevelt gave the graduation address to his son Franklin Junior’s class at the University of Virginia.²⁵ The speech was altered at the last minute in order to incorporate Italy’s act of war. It also included for the first time a promise that the U.S. would act on the internationalist position Roosevelt had been trying to convince the American people was necessary at least since his “Quarantine” speech of 1937: a policy of collective security, aid to Great Britain, and taking up the role of world leader.²⁶

The President’s speech at the University of Virginia slipped quickly from congratulating the young graduates to addressing the troubled world they were about to enter. Arguing against the isolationists, Roosevelt maintained that the actions of the last few months had rendered their vision of the United States as “a lone island” untenable:

Such an island may be the dream of those who still talk and vote as isolationists. Such an island represents to me and to the overwhelming majority of Americans today a helpless nightmare, the helpless nightmare of a people without freedom. Yes, the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitiful masters of other continents.²⁷

This summary rejection of the isolationist viewpoint was worded much more strongly than Roosevelt had ever before allowed himself to speak in public. Bolstered by new figures

²⁴ “FDR to Lewis W. Douglas in New York,” June 7 1940 in *FDR: His Personal Letters, 1928-1945*, Volume II (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1950), 1037-8.

²⁵ Levin, *Making of FDR*, 214.

²⁶ David F. Schmitz, *The Triumph of Internationalism: Franklin D. Roosevelt and a World in Crisis, 1933-1941* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007), 66.

²⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address at Charlottesville, Virginia, June 10, 1940.

indicating that 80 percent of the public now supported aid to the Allies, Roosevelt was able to strengthen both his language and his policy. He continued:

We will pursue two obvious and simultaneous courses; we will extend to the opponents of force the material resources of this nation and, at the same time, we will harness and speed up the use of those resources in order that we ourselves in the Americas may have equipment and training equal to the task of any emergency and every defense.²⁸

This was a promise of determined action. During the summer of 1940 an extensive and public plan for giving aid to the Allies was to be developed, culminating on September 3, 1940, with the Destroyers for Bases agreement. But between the declaration of action and the actual agreement, Roosevelt and the press went through several difficult news cycles.

Sympathy, If Not Support

The press had not been expecting any big international news to be announced at a graduation address, but Stephen Early, Roosevelt's press secretary, stayed at the White House until midnight the night before to inform the press that Roosevelt would make an important announcement on the war the following day. Early then accompanied the President to Charlottesville and oversaw the arrangements for the speech at the University to be broadcast live on all radio networks.²⁹ The press turned out for the event in full force and their coverage was largely positive. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune* all reprinted the text of Roosevelt's speech for their readers. Reception at the University of Virginia was described as supportive; the *Washington Post* wrote "When the President said that 'the whole of our sympathies' lie with the nations that are fighting 'the gods of force and hate,' the flag-draped gymnasium echoed with wild shouts of approval."³⁰ The *Post's* editorial was

²⁸ Roosevelt, Address at Charlottesville.

²⁹ Levin, *Making of FDR*, 214.

³⁰ George Bookman, "President Pledges 'Full Speed Ahead' on Material Aid to Allies in Fervent Prayer for Their Victory," *Washington Post*, June 11, 1940.

similarly approving. It took to task those who had disagreed with Roosevelt in the past and welcomed the President's forthright declaration:

The truth and justice of Mr. Roosevelt's declaration is so obvious that no voice is likely to be heard in contradiction. But the present unanimity of American opinion only emphasizes the tragedy of the period, prior to last September, when the President time and again drew much the same conclusions and the country failed to recognize its importance.³¹

The *Tribune*, the severest critic of the President, featured a surprisingly mild response to his Charlottesville speech. While the paper's front page article did begin by claiming, "Isolationists were assailed by Mr. Roosevelt," it did not write an editorial from the point of view of those isolationists; it was much more preoccupied with the military developments in Italy.³² Despite their endorsement of the President's address, both the *Post* and the *Times* featured articles detailing various congressmen's disapproval. The *Post* quoted Senator Burton Wheeler, a Democrat from Montana and prominent isolationist, for example, who "agree[d] with what [Roosevelt] said about preserving democracy in this country and with what he said about Mussolini. I would have liked it better if he had added that he was going to keep this country out of war."³³ Such sentiment, coming from a fellow Democrat, emphasized how Roosevelt was going to have to tread carefully in the coming months, especially with the presidential election approaching on November 5, 1940. (Roosevelt's campaign was already notable as he was the first president in history officially seeking a third term.)

Other Democrats shared Senator Wheeler's concern. Senator Adams of Colorado suggested a "wise corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, that, for the participation of the rest of the world, "we should not interfere with the affairs of Europe."³⁴ Republicans expressed more outright concern. According to Representative Rogers of Massachusetts, quoted in the *Post*, "The

³¹ "At Charlottesville," *The Washington Post*, June 11, 1940.

³² "Roosevelt Rips Italy; Pledges Help to Allies," *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 1940.

³³ "Indorsement, Concern Greet Roosevelt Talk," *Washington Post*, June 11, 1940.

³⁴ "Indorsement," *The Washington Post*.

speech sounded to me like a declaration of war.”³⁵ While these statements marked out the playing field for future political debate, the papers were also careful to emphasize the public’s support of Roosevelt’s statements. The *New York Times* quoted New York Democrat Sol Bloom, Chair of the House’s Foreign Affairs Committee as saying, “The President’s address proves conclusively that he had continued his efforts to bring about peace in the world, and I doubt if any Americans disapprove or disagree with any word he uttered.”³⁶

The President and the Press

Roosevelt’s University of Virginia speech was unusual in that he had not floated a test balloon with the White House press corps beforehand to judge their reaction, though this was surely a result of the sudden nature of Italy’s attack on France. Although Early had alerted the press to the speech and seen to it that it was broadcast and well-covered, when the President began his press conference the next afternoon, he took not a little enjoyment at the reversal of the usual order of things:

The President: Plenty of news today all right.

Q: A lot of news from Charlottesville yesterday.

The President: Yes, I scooped you.³⁷

This colloquial exchange is indicative of Roosevelt’s relationship with the press. Part of Roosevelt’s success in ultimately convincing the press, and thereby the public, of the necessity of internationalism was his rapport with reporters. In a footnote to the collection of his public papers and addresses, Roosevelt himself wrote, “The great majority of newspaper correspondents

³⁵ “Indorsement,” *Washington Post*.

³⁶ “Congress Members Applaud the Speech,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1940.

³⁷ Press Conference #651, Executive Offices of the White House, June 11, 1940.

who cover the White House are personally friendly to the Administration.”³⁸ Reporters echoed this sentiment; in 1938 the President of the National Press Club addressed Roosevelt, declaring, “Win, lose, or draw, in triumph or reversal, regardless of our personal opinions of your policies, we feel you have been a newspaperman’s President.”³⁹ However to gain their editorial support, Roosevelt also had to be liked and agreed with by editors and publishers, who were not in the room with him twice a week and did not always subscribe to the President’s beliefs.

Still the President endeavored to gain favorable coverage. The typical pattern between Roosevelt and the press during a press conference was that the President would mention various possibilities of what he might do in order, it seems, to see how the press would react, so the message he expressed at the University of Virginia speech came as a surprise. In his most recent press conference on June 8, the President had not made any mention of U.S. aid to the Allies at all, although there had been an extensive discussion of military preparations to defend America. The President had also said that he probably would not be able to get down to Charlottesville for the graduation.⁴⁰ There is thus good reason to believe that Roosevelt’s speech was quickly generated, a direct response to Italy’s joining the Axis. In a quip to a reporter, Roosevelt showed that he had not fully thought out how his speech would change the country’s stance (or, at least, that he had not decided on a way to articulate it to the press):

Q: Mr. President, would it be possible, in the light of present events, to use the term, “non-belligerent” as applied to the United States, instead of the term “neutral?”

The President: John (Mr. O’Donnell), I haven’t had time since yesterday to open my thesaurus.⁴¹

³⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume Two, The Year of the Crisis: 1933* (New York: Random House, 1938), 38.

³⁹ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years 1690-1941* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 724.

⁴⁰ Press Conference #650, Executive Offices of the White House, June 8, 1940.

⁴¹ Press Conference #651, Executive Offices of the White House, June 11, 1940.

Roosevelt's joke again shows the familiar way in which he addressed the press, but also how he used this style to avoid answering questions he was not yet prepared to answer. Roosevelt did not commit to deciding whether "non-belligerent" meant the same thing as the old label of neutrality, leaving open the possibility for a greater shift in policy to come in due course. As the summer of 1940 progressed, Roosevelt kept moving carefully in this way, trying to gain acceptance from the press and by extension the public, to aid Great Britain.

This process was far from simple. At Charlottesville, Roosevelt had enunciated a double-pronged strategy: that the U.S. would aid Great Britain while securing resources to protect itself. Therefore, the President had to guard against any significant dilution of national strength in supporting Great Britain, a country then caught in the Battle of Britain, which many, including many Congressmen and the Ambassador to Great Britain Joseph Kennedy, considered a lost cause.⁴² Congress turned this view into law on June 28, when it forbade the sale of army and navy supplies unless service chiefs declared those supplies unessential to national defense.⁴³

Understanding the public's temperament, Roosevelt made little mention of his desire to provide the Allies with war supplies during the summer. But in an effort to educate public opinion towards his internationalist point of view, he spent a great deal of time taking reporters with him on his tours of naval facilities and frequently commented on the strength of the American military and the measures that were being taken to produce more airplanes and enlist more servicemen. The British press at this time was clamoring for support from America. Churchill told Roosevelt that the acquisition of even over-age American warships was "a matter of life or death" and King George VI also made a personal appeal to the President.⁴⁴

⁴² Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 243.

⁴³ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 243.

⁴⁴ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 243.

Destroyers for Bases

Roosevelt was convinced by Churchill's appeal and believed Great Britain could win the war, but there were legal and political constraints preventing him from making the bold internationalist move of giving Great Britain the American destroyers it would need to do so. Traditionally Congress' approval would be needed for an international agreement of this kind. However, Churchill's insistence persuaded Roosevelt of the situation's urgency, and he began to look for a way around the constraints of his office. Prominent jurists persuaded Roosevelt that the Executive could act in this case without Congressional approval, and Roosevelt proceeded to make the deal with Churchill on August 13. In return, the U.S. secured leases on British naval and air bases, which held up the second prong of Roosevelt's policy: to enhance the defense and security of the U.S.⁴⁵ In lieu of gaining Congressional approval, Roosevelt told the press of his intentions.⁴⁶ He did not have (nor had he asked for) the consent of Congress, but the members of the press corps were also representatives of the people, and were also important to Roosevelt as a means of gauging the potential reaction of the public at large. Here the President created a new role for the press; they truly were the fourth estate, a group of political representatives with considerable influence. They did not always agree with him, but their value could not be discounted.

Roosevelt brought up the matter of the destroyers in a very canny way. Talking about American generals visiting England, a subject tangentially related to the question of the destroyers, he remarked, "And somebody will ask me about the destroyers so you might just as well know now."⁴⁷ It was not certain that someone would actually have asked about the destroyers; the deal had not yet been announced and Roosevelt acknowledged that the American

⁴⁵ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 245.

⁴⁶ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 245.

⁴⁷ Press Conference #671, Executive Offices of the White House, August 16th, 1940.

generals visiting England had nothing to do with the destroyers, but he clearly wanted to get the story out so that he could gauge public reception:

I am initiating, holding conversations with the British Government for the acquisition of Naval bases and Air bases for the defense of the Americas and particularly with relationship to the Panama Canal. If you want to put that in quotes, you can put it this way: that the United States Government is holding conversation with the Government of the British Empire in regard to the acquisition of Naval and Air Bases by the United States for American Hemisphere defense, with special reference to the Panama Canal – end of quote.⁴⁸

That the President directly delivered a quotation was significant. Roosevelt's press conferences were usually off the record, a forum in which he could touch base with the press and they could understand the mood of the White House. The press conferences, unlike those conducted today, were not to generate specific quotes for news stories. The fact that the President allowed the press to quote this piece of information – and indeed had a quote at the ready – was a cue to reporters that he wanted this story to break.

Roosevelt also tried to control the angle that the press would take on the story; he emphasized that “It is not a matter of destroyers,” but of America obtaining naval and air bases that could serve national defense. Or, in his own words, “the emphasis is on the acquisition of the bases – that is the main point – for the protection of this Hemisphere.”⁴⁹ Such directing of attention was a political strategy. By August 1940 Roosevelt was the Democratic candidate for the presidency, running for his third term against Republican Wendell Willkie, a moderate Republican who went back and forth on the question of isolationism versus internationalism. In this context Roosevelt sought to control the press reaction and attempted to exercise a degree of control: He refused to answer many questions, repeating “I cannot give you any more information than I have given you here,” and, when posed with ‘what if’ questions by reporters,

⁴⁸ Press Conference #671.

⁴⁹ Press Conference #671.

he cautioned them against “do[ing] any assuming.”⁵⁰ At the time of the press conference in question Roosevelt did not yet have official legal sanction for the deal from either the Attorney General or the Chief of Naval Operations.⁵¹ Given the agreement’s political sensitivity, Roosevelt could not risk any reporters embroidering his policy, and jeopardizing the approval of these critical backers. He therefore limited himself to just the facts and forestalled undue interpretations.

Roosevelt’s tactic worked; the press did what he implicitly asked of it. Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* ran cover stories about Roosevelt’s announcement. The *Chicago Tribune*’s lead story, on the other hand, was about Wendell Willkie accepting the Republican nomination for President in Elwood, Indiana. The *Times* acknowledged the unique way in which the President had disclosed the information. This was, according to Graham J. White, normal for the *Times*, whose reports, as opposed to those of the *Post*, “not infrequently went beyond a straightforward narrative of presidential announcements [...] to descriptions of the atmosphere of the press conferences and to observations derived inferentially from the President’s answers or refusals to answer.”⁵² On this occasion the *New York Times* claimed,

This announcement, first made verbally at [Roosevelt’s] press conference and then authorized for direct quotation, led to the opinion among some observers, based on normal practice, that the negotiations would not have been revealed at all if some basis for concluding arrangements had not been found.⁵³

By referring to the observers present in the room, and how the President’s announcement differed from his usual practice, the *Times* emphasized how imminent the deal seemed to be. And in fact it was – Roosevelt had agreed to give Great Britain the destroyers on August 13.

⁵⁰ Press Conference #671.

⁵¹ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 246.

⁵² White, *FDR and the Press*, 111.

⁵³ “U.S. Is Negotiating for British Bases, Plan With Canada,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1941.

However, in his press conference, Roosevelt had tried very hard to downplay any such assumption. He stressed to the members of the press present that it was not about the destroyers, although there would be a quid pro quo for the use of the British bases, the President did “not know what the quid pro quo is going to be.”⁵⁴ Though this was disingenuous because on August 13 Roosevelt and Churchill had decided that the swap would be of American destroyers for British bases (and in fact, Great Britain’s need for destroyers had prompted the deal in the first place), Roosevelt maintained to the press that the bases were the important part, and he was unsure of the details of the U.S.’s side of the agreement. This did not stop the papers from speculating. The *Tribune* quoted Democratic Senator Claude Pepper of Florida saying, “destroyers would constitute at least part of the concessions made by the United States.”⁵⁵ The *Times* reported that Roosevelt had communicated directly with British Prime Minister Churchill, sometimes by telephone, and that “it appeared to some observers that what may be in the offing is an executive agreement or a series of them which would not require Congressional approval.”⁵⁶ The *Washington Post* reached out to British sources, but they backed up the President’s story:

In London the United Press quoted authoritative British sources as saying that Prime Minister Winston Churchill had formally offered the United States 99-year leases on all British islands between Newfoundland and Guiana for use as bases. These sources the United Press said, declared there is no question of selling the islands and that the discussion of the island bases was not linked with proposals that the United States transfer destroyers to Great Britain.⁵⁷

Since Great Britain was at war, its press was being censored. Although there were internal debates within the administration about censoring the press earlier, Roosevelt did not impose any censorship upon the media until America entered WWII at the end of 1941.⁵⁸ In

⁵⁴ Press Conference #671, Executive Offices of the White House, August 16th, 1940.

⁵⁵ Chesly Manly, “U.S. Destroyer Sale to Great Britain Reported Near,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1941.

⁵⁶ “U.S. Is Negotiating for British Bases, Plan With Canada,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1941.

⁵⁷ “Roosevelt Says No Ship Deal Is Considered in Discussions,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 1941.

⁵⁸ Steele, *Propaganda*, 104.

hindsight even writing that the President had cautioned reporters not to link the destroyers to the bases while at the same time the United Press stressed the lack of connection between the two seems to imply that the two would in fact be linked in a soon-to-be passed agreement. However, the effort that was taken to downplay this connection underlined the delicacy of the situation.

The situation was especially delicate because of the executive power the President was assuming. This was where the *Tribune* focused its coverage. The paper reported that, although Attorney General Robert H. Jackson was in the process of writing a certification that would make it lawful for the U.S. to sell destroyers to Great Britain pending approval from the Chief of Naval Operations, such a document would not comply with previous legislation, especially the recently renewed Espionage Act of 1917. The *Tribune* then quoted Senator David Walsh, a Democrat from Massachusetts, calling the proposed deal “an act of belligerency and war.”⁵⁹ The *Tribune* made many of its attacks against the President in this language, and after he won re-election the dictator accusations only increased (the paper called Lend-Lease the “Dictator Bill” from its inception until its passage). Facing accusations such as these, Roosevelt’s interactions with the press were all the more important. By seeking out the public’s weekly response to his actions, the President was able to show his democratic intentions to represent the people.

A Done Deal

Still, once the President had obtained adequate public support for a policy, he often disregarded the press. On September 3, 1940, Roosevelt officially announced the Destroyers for Bases agreement to the press on board his train to Washington. Although he had alluded to the idea weeks before, this announcement took place only 22 minutes before Roosevelt was set to deliver his message to Congress. He said he was sharing the story with the press because “you

⁵⁹ Chesly Manly, “U.S. Destroyer Sale to Great Britain Reported Near,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1940.

ought to know about it because it will probably get all kinds of flashes, ‘For God’s sake, to get some news.’ Well, there isn’t any news.”⁶⁰ What Roosevelt meant by this is that he was not going to share any of his opinions beyond the facts of the story. And he did not. He read his message to Congress and then fended off questions. When a reporter asked the difference between the status of two bases – one was a gift, while the other was leased – he refused to explain it, saying that it involved “Oh, all kinds of things that nobody here would understand, so I won’t mention them. It is a fait accompli; it is done this way.”⁶¹ This response is striking. While Roosevelt treated the press as a *de facto* Congress just weeks prior, once the deal was sealed, he responded to questions with elitism, the implicit message being “It is done this way” whether you like it or not. Richard W. Steele argues that Roosevelt was so tight-lipped during this press conference to avoid saying anything that could be used against him by newspaper reporters – that he was being defensive, not just suddenly discounting the press’ importance.⁶² This is true to some extent – Roosevelt repeated the phrase “I don’t know” three times during the press conference, and refused to answer “if” questions yet again, this time defining an “if” question as any that went beyond the text of the statement. But the President did stray from his prepared statement to discuss his feelings about the agreement finally being passed.

Roosevelt made it clear to the press that the Destroyers for Bases agreement was not only very important, but that he was very happy about it. Before reading the text of his statement to Congress he told the press that the agreement was “probably the most important thing that has come for American defense since the Louisiana Purchase.”⁶³ (He then joked with a reporter that the Louisiana Purchase was before both of their time.) Tying the agreement to a previous event

⁶⁰ Press Conference #677, Aboard the Presidential Special Train, en route from Charleston, West Va., to Washington, D.C., September 3, 1940.

⁶¹ Press Conference #677.

⁶² Steele, *Propaganda*, 113.

⁶³ Press Conference #677.

in American history was a means of underlining its historic importance, but also of making it sound less drastic. Roosevelt gave a long, winding talk about Napoleon and Jefferson regarding the Louisiana Purchase to emphasize that previous political leaders of different countries had worked together to ensure national defense earlier in American history. Roosevelt also foregrounded the moral aspect of the agreement, in that it was the right thing to do, not just the militarily advantageous course of action. When a reporter asked him how much the destroyers were worth, he responded:

You are thinking in terms of dollars and cents and pounds and shillings and pence and you should, in a great emergency, remove pure figures from your mind. Some people will say, undoubtedly – this is still off the record that, from the point of view of dollars and cents, it is not a good idea. And others will say, ‘My God, that old Dutchman and Scotchman in the White House has made a damn good trade.’ Personally, you can take your money and take your choice. Personally, I think it is a damned good trade.⁶⁴

It is significant that this statement was not on the record. Roosevelt thus made the press privy to his private, privileged thinking. Isolationists would go on to make a case against this deal on the basis of cost. Roosevelt knew this argument – as well as the argument that the deal was a step towards war – would be the major one made against him. Still Roosevelt made clear to the press that he thought this argument a weak one. In this case, the morality of the agreement took precedence over its monetary value. But even more than enhancing American security or aiding Great Britain, Warren F. Kimball has argued that the swap of destroyers for bases was “a major psychological step in getting the United States and Great Britain ‘all mixed up together’ in the public (and congressional) mind.”⁶⁵ The extensive press coverage of the agreement was the method by which this psychological step was taken.

Press reaction was mixed, and articles which praised the deal largely did so on the basis of its benefits to American security, rather than the morality of helping the British that Roosevelt

⁶⁴ Press Conference #677. (The “old Dutchman and Scotchman” is Roosevelt himself.)

⁶⁵ Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12.

himself had stressed. The *Chicago Tribune*'s coverage is a good example of this divided response. On the one hand, the paper praised the deal, saying "Any arrangement which gives the United States naval and air bases in regions which must be brought within the American defense zone is to be accepted as a triumph." However, the editorial followed this sentiment with the warning that "the compensation it must be admitted, is a dangerous one."⁶⁶

The *New York Times* included a round up of editorials regarding Destroyers for Bases from papers across the nation, displaying the mixed reaction. One of the strongest voices against the agreement, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, outright condemned the action, with the sub-headline "Dictator Roosevelt Commits an Act of War."⁶⁷ First, the *Post-Dispatch* argued that Roosevelt was a dictator because he had acted unilaterally without consulting Congress. Roosevelt's challenger for the presidency, Wendell Willkie, had the same problem. Although he supported the agreement, declaring that "the country will undoubtedly approve the program to add to our naval and air bases and assistance given to Great Britain," Willkie declared it "regrettable, however, that the President did not deem it necessary in connection with this proposal, to secure the approval of Congress or permit public discussion prior to adoption."⁶⁸ It is true that Roosevelt had not consulted Congress, and when he mentioned the agreement to the press several weeks earlier in that rare on the record comment, he heavily managed the press, refusing to answer many of their questions and refraining from including that the U.S. would be giving Great Britain destroyers in exchange for naval and air bases. However the papers that ran stories about Roosevelt's hints towards an agreement between the two countries enjoyed high readerships and were the principal papers that aroused public debate.

⁶⁶ "Comment by Press on British Accord," *New York Times*, September 4, 1940.

⁶⁷ "Comment by Press," *New York Times*.

⁶⁸ "Willkie Decries Failure to Tell Public of Ship Deal in Advance," *Washington Post*, September 4, 1940.

The *Post-Dispatch* article raised a second complaint to Roosevelt's action: that it was tantamount to an act of war. Others did not deny that this might be a possible result of the action – Hitler might interpret America's support of Great Britain as akin to the declaration of an alliance and in turn declare war on the U.S. as well, and, in that event, the country might need all the destroyers it had. The *New York Times* was careful to point out that the fifty destroyers had "been certified by Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations, as not essential to the defense of the United States."⁶⁹ The *Washington Post's* editorial used the reference Roosevelt had made to Jefferson and Napoleon to justify the action:

Not since the days of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe has the United States faced greater peril outside our own borders. Now as during the period of the Napoleonic Wars and the Holy Alliance the situation calls for bold and courageous action. It is to President Roosevelt's credit that he has seen fit to take such action.⁷⁰

While the *Washington Post* acknowledged that it was wartime and Roosevelt's actions could be seen as provocative, it also stressed that Roosevelt was rising to the level of his historical forefathers, intimating that he would make a strong wartime President.

⁶⁹ "Calls 50 Old Ships Not Needed By U.S.," *New York Times*, September 4, 1940.

⁷⁰ "Bases for Destroyers," *Washington Post*, September 4, 1940.

Chapter 2: September-December 1940

In an election year the *Washington Post*'s praise of the President's step towards internationalism was especially important. And it was not the only such endorsement the President received. A Gallup poll conducted on September 4, 1940 – the day after Destroyers for Bases was announced – showed that if Great Britain was defeated and the U.S. would have to fight Germany alone, 58 percent of respondents preferred President Roosevelt as their commander in chief to Willkie. But if the election were held that day, with Great Britain still fighting and America not in the war, only 51 percent preferred Roosevelt.⁷¹ There is not a huge difference between these two figures, but it may have been significant enough to decide the election. Regardless, Roosevelt was already crafting for himself the image of wartime President – a year before the country would actually enter the war. While this image would make it possible for Roosevelt to continue to increase support for the Allied war effort, which would culminate in Lend-Lease at the beginning of his third term, he still worried that this might prove a handicap during the election. Despite the support that the Destroyers for Bases agreement generated, Roosevelt recognized this was largely due to the benefits the U.S. gained from it. With the great majority of Americans still opposed to direct involvement in the war, Roosevelt believed that the Republicans might effectively exploit this sentiment to unite the country against him.⁷² He therefore downplayed the importance of aid to the Allies during his press conferences between September, when the agreement was signed, and the election in November.

During this period the Battle of Britain continued and Hitler extended his control into Romania and Italy and invaded Greece. The understandably preoccupied President spent most of his time in the White House unable to head off on official campaign travel. When he did venture

⁷¹ "The Gallup Poll – Voters Prefer Roosevelt if British Lose," *Washington Post*, September 4, 1940.

⁷² Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 247.

out, it was on what he called “inspection trips,” by which he meant tours of military plants. He brought reporters with him on these trips, emphasizing to the press how he was helping bolster America’s security. On September 20 1940 for example Roosevelt took reporters with him to the Philadelphia Naval Yard – where some of the 50 destroyers sent to Great Britain had been restored – and touted the success of the site:

Q: Are you pleased with the progress you have seen here?

The President: Very much. This whole thing is a very amazing illustration of what has been done in the Navy Yards. One of the interesting things is that we are stepping up on our time – the time of construction is a great deal less than it was a year ago. We are learning the art of speed in emergency.⁷³

Roosevelt similarly emphasized the advances made at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Fort Meade, and Watervliet Arsenal.⁷⁴ Bringing the press along on these trips was intended to underscore Roosevelt’s strengths as a military leader, but while the country was learning the art of speed and efficiency in an emergency under his leadership, Roosevelt himself was losing speed in the press as a candidate for re-election. This of course was a campaign strategy of its own. By delivering phrases like “speed in emergency” to the press, Roosevelt was emphasizing that war could come any day, and that if it did, he was the one who would be prepared to handle it.

Losing Press Support

Still Roosevelt lost press support because of the combined fear of American involvement in the European war and his unconventional bid for what some called a dictatorial third term.

⁷³ Press Conference #681, Held while the President was seated in his automobile, just before leaving the Philadelphia Naval Yard, September 20, 1940.

⁷⁴ Press Conference #684, This conference was held in two parts, a morning conference at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, after completion of an inspection tour through the grounds; and an afternoon conference at Fort Meade, following completion of the inspection there, September 30, 1940; Press Conference #687, Prior to leaving Watervliet Arsenal, following an inspection trip, October 7, 1940.

Former election supporters such as the *New York Times*, Henry Luce of *Time* and *Life* magazines, Joe Patterson of the *New York Daily News*, and Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain all came out for Wendell Willkie.⁷⁵ Still, Roosevelt met accusatory comments from reporters at his press conferences with sarcasm; on October 15 for example, one reporter asked him his comments on some of the conservative opinions against him:

Q: Mr. President, here is one that may be a little long: On your forthcoming political speeches, do you intend to answer charges made by your political opposition that you are seeking to become a dictator, and that there will be nothing to prevent you, or others after you, from seeking additional terms of office if you are elected to a third term?

The President: That is interesting; it has everything except the kitchen stove in it. Who wrote it?

Q: I did.

The President: Good boy! My congratulations to you!

Q: Is there an answer?

The President: My congratulations to you; it is beautifully worded!⁷⁶

Roosevelt responded here both evasively and mockingly, still ahead in the polls while his opponent Willkie shared much the same opinions on the war issue as he did. Willkie's chance for success might have come had he took the opposite stance from the President regarding aid for Great Britain and improving America's national security, but Willkie did not do so.

Towards the end of the campaign, however, Willkie did try to distance himself from Roosevelt by claiming that he supported measures necessary only for defense, whereas the President, if re-elected, had every intention of taking the country into war. Roosevelt responded in a speech in Boston on October 30, 1940, just days before the election, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again. You boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."⁷⁷

David F. Schmitz has argued that the President dropped his usual qualifier – "except in the case

⁷⁵ Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 143.

⁷⁶ Press Conference #689, At the White House, October 15, 1940.

⁷⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address in Boston, October 30th, 1940.

of attack” – here so as not to lead people to believe Willkie was correct so close to the election.⁷⁸ But it was the nation’s confidence in Roosevelt’s ability to handle the possibility of war that won him the election. He secured a demonstrative victory, although lower than either of his first two elections – 55% of the popular vote and 38 of the 48 states, or 499 electoral votes to Willkie’s 82.⁷⁹

Although Roosevelt was elected with a large popular mandate he did so with the editorial support of less than 23 percent of the daily press. But his public support did not lead him to discount the importance of the press. Armed with four more years in office, Roosevelt could have shrugged off accusations that he was behaving dictatorially and pushed forward with his agenda regardless of public response. However, the President did not do so. He continued to engage with the press as a means to promote his internationalist agenda and gauge public opinion in response to it. Even when editorials were negative, Roosevelt’s frequent press conferences all served to get his arguments out to the people, while making sure that the debate between internationalism and isolationism continued throughout the country at large.

The Question of Presidential Power

It was not just the press that was thinking about dictators, but Roosevelt saw himself as a democratic leader, and his electoral victory as serving the salvation of American democracy. Although his challenger Willkie supported aid to the British, the President had worried that a Willkie win could have been interpreted as a victory for the isolationist, pro-appeasement forces in the country. Describing what this possibility could have meant for the future of the U.S.,

⁷⁸ Schmitz, *Triumph of Internationalism*, 71.

⁷⁹ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 250.

Roosevelt remarked privately on election night, “We seem to have averted a *putsch*.”⁸⁰ This reference to Nazi Germany indicates that the President was thinking about the more dictatorial forms of government that had arisen abroad, and decisively saw himself and his party in contradistinction to those developments. The press too underlined what the election meant for the U.S. in light of foreign affairs. After not supporting Roosevelt’s candidacy, the *Times*’ editorial was neutral towards the President’s re-election. The paper offered a general discussion of what Roosevelt’s third term meant for the country. The paper noted that everything about the President’s campaign had been geared to the conflict abroad and had emphasized his foreign policy experience:

Everything was pitched on foreign policy and the mass benefits conferred by the New Deal, and this, plus the personality of Mr. Roosevelt, was successful in making the President the first Chief Executive in history to whom the two term limitation was not applied.⁸¹

The *Chicago Tribune* took issue with the appeal of what the *Times* called the “personality of Mr. Roosevelt.” In an editorial two days after the election, the *Tribune* argued that the President’s sweeping margin in the Electoral College and his smaller, but still sizable lead in the popular vote did not connote a landslide but only sectional appeal. The paper stated, “WPA foremen alone in these states [with small margins of victory for the President] could have carried the election.” The *Tribune*’s editorial was decidedly unfavorable, targeting the power of the executive and the Democratic Party as unfairly having affected the results:

Four years ago Mr. Roosevelt had a plurality of nearly 11 million in the country and he carried all but 2 states. That plurality compared with the one of Tuesday, without any deduction for the southern vote where it is virtually illegal to vote Republican, shows a shrinkage of 4,500,00 or thereabouts. That’s not a landslide. It is an election controlled by the influence of the party in power and the man in office.⁸²

⁸⁰ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 251. “Putsch” is the German word for *coup d’etat*. The Beer Hall Putsch was the failed attempt by Hitler and Erich Ludendorff to seize power in Munich in 1923.

⁸¹ “Big Electoral Vote – Large Pivotal States Swing to Democrats in East and West – Popular Vote Cut – First Time in History That Third Term Is Granted President,” *New York Times*, November 6 1940.

⁸² “The True Picture of the Election,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 7 1940.

Walter Lippmann, writing in the *Washington Post*, also cautioned against reading too much into the mandate, albeit less critically:

The initiative and the power to unite the nation or to divide it irreparably are placed by this election squarely, indisputably, upon Franklin D. Roosevelt. The responsibility is his and this is the mandate of the election, the only mandate which can be read into the returns.⁸³

Lippmann, like the *Tribune* editorialists, was referring here to the power of the President, but while the *Tribune* targeted the power of the office, Lippmann nodded towards the power of Roosevelt's personality, not just his extended tenure in executive office. Each of the three newspapers emphasized that, rightly or wrongly, Roosevelt enjoyed a tremendous and unusual amount of power going into his third term.

Roosevelt's focus had never really shifted away from the question of aid to Great Britain. Even during the campaign he had been preoccupied by the foreign policy situation. With the campaign officially over, the full attention of the country also turned back to the overriding issue of the day: to what extent should the U.S. aid Great Britain. Hearing the news of the President's re-election, Churchill wrote to Roosevelt:

I prayed for your success and [...] I am truly thankful for it. We are entering upon a somber phase of what must evidently be a protracted and broadening war [...] Things are afoot which will be remembered as long as the English language is spoken in any quarter of the globe.⁸⁴

Understanding the severity of the situation, Roosevelt now gave more direct expression to his goal of aiding the British in the days immediately following his election. In his November 8, 1940 press conference he spoke about allocating Great Britain half of all newly produced munitions.⁸⁵ At first he dealt with questions about the Defense Commission very practically, but one question hinted at Roosevelt's perspective on aiding the British:

⁸³ Walter Lippmann, "Mr. Roosevelt's Mandate," *Washington Post*, November 7 1940.

⁸⁴ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 251.

⁸⁵ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 252.

Q: Mr. President, in dealing with this request of 12,000 planes, you said the Defense Commission had been asked to give its sympathetic consideration. Has that sympathetic consideration resulted in a final decision?

The President: Not yet; it is being studied.⁸⁶

Before the election, Roosevelt would have refuted the claim that he wanted the matter considered sympathetically – the adverb went beyond the simple facts of the story, which the President repeatedly told reporters to limit their coverage to. But after winning the election Roosevelt took no issue with this embellishment.

Although Roosevelt had won re-election, his road to American internationalism was still not unobstructed. There were still high-profile voices in his administration who disagreed with him, most notably the American Ambassador to Great Britain, Joseph Kennedy. Kennedy had been a supporter of Churchill's appeasement-minded predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, and at the height of the London Blitz in October 1940 had returned home to the U.S. for good, declaring that "England is gone" and "I'm for appeasement one thousand percent."⁸⁷ Back in the States, Kennedy went about articulating this conviction to the anti-Roosevelt, pro-appeasement press. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes worried that Kennedy

Had an interview with Hearst with a view to starting a campaign for appeasement, and has seen, or is about to see, Roy Howard [head of the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain] and Joe Patterson of the *New York Daily News* [...] which has the greatest circulation of any newspaper in the country.⁸⁸

He also speculated that the *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Times-Herald* would go along.

Roosevelt invited Kennedy to Hyde Park to discuss the issue but the meeting did not go well. Roosevelt told Eleanor "I never want to see that son of a bitch again as long as I live. Take his resignation and get him out of here!"⁸⁹ (The President later asked Kennedy to perform

⁸⁶ Press Conference #134.

⁸⁷ Lynne Olson, *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood With Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 4.

⁸⁸ Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR: The War President, 1940-1943*. (New York: Random House, 2000), 60.

⁸⁹ Davis, *War President*, 62.

ambassadorial functions until a new ambassador could be named.) Kennedy, meanwhile, told the press that his plans for the future would be to “devote my efforts to what seems to me the greatest cause in the world [...] That cause is to help the President keep the United States out of war.”⁹⁰ Kennedy turned out to be much less of a threat to his foreign policy than Roosevelt feared, and his successor, John Gilbert Winant, was one of the greatest advocates of American support for the British. But the amount of attention the President paid to Kennedy’s articulation of his pro-appeasement views to the press while still affiliated with the administration shows the issue of power from the other side: Kennedy wielded a considerable amount of political clout due to his prestige. But it equally shows how importantly Roosevelt viewed press support for his foreign policy agenda.

By the end of November another sensitive issue had arisen: the question of money in relation to America’s aid to Great Britain. On November 23, Lord Lothian, the British ambassador to America, told a group of U.S. reporters upon his arrival at New York’s LaGuardia Airport, “Well boys, Great Britain’s broke, it’s your money we want.”⁹¹ These blunt remarks exploded across newspaper headlines.⁹² The headlines shocked the American public, who did not know Great Britain’s financial plight was so dire. Roosevelt had been aware of Great Britain’s financial predicament, even if he did not believe it to be quite as bad as it was, but now he worried that Lothian’s statement would give congressional isolationists ammunition to destroy the aid program, especially as Roosevelt was already facing legal difficulties in his desire to transfer war material to the British.⁹³ The Neutrality Act forbade the sale of U.S. arms to any

⁹⁰ Michael Beschloss, *Kennedy and Roosevelt: The Uneasy Alliance*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 230.

⁹¹ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 252.

⁹² The *New York Times*’s headline read “British Funds Low, Lothian Says Here.” The *Washington Post*’s read “Great Britain Near End of Finances, Needs U.S. Aid, Lothian Says,” and the *Chicago Tribune* used the ambassador’s direct phrase in its headline: “Envoy Lothian Claims Great Britain Is Going Broke.”

⁹³ Davis, *War President*, 63.

country at war. While this law was amended in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland to allow the sale of armaments for cash as long as the recipient country also paid to transport the material in their own ships (known as “Cash and Carry”), it still barred loans and required immediate cash payment for all munitions sold to a belligerent.⁹⁴

In a meeting with Lothian, Roosevelt told the ambassador that his request for financial help was premature and would remain so until the American public was thoroughly convinced that the British had liquidated their assets in the Western Hemisphere. At his press conference immediately following their conversation the question of Great Britain’s financial situation came up:

Question: Mr. President, did the British Ambassador present any specific requests for additional help?

The President: I am sorry, I shall have to disappoint quite a number of papers, nothing was mentioned in that regard at all, not one single thing – ships or sealing wax or anything else.⁹⁵

Roosevelt’s complete denial here is significant. The President did not want to start American financial aid to Great Britain before he was sure it was not only necessary but acceptable. More importantly he did not want to have to deal with the fears of isolationists responding to quotes in newspapers about the possibility of his increasing American aid before he was ready to. This speaks directly to the power the press had in the debate between isolationism and internationalism, which would only grow as the debate intensified.

The Beginning of Lend-Lease

What readied Roosevelt for a new plan to aid Great Britain was a more formal action, compared to Lothian’s blunt remarks outside the airport. On December 8, Churchill sent Roosevelt a letter he called “one of the most important I ever wrote,” which described Great

⁹⁴ Schmitz, *Triumph of Internationalism*, 71.

⁹⁵ Press Conference #697, Executive Offices of the White House, November 26, 1940.

Britain's prospects for 1941. He outlined British shortages in weapons, ships, and planes, the devastating losses being suffered at sea, and the fast approaching exhaustion of British financial resources to purchase goods from the United States. Playing the moral card that Roosevelt had long employed with the American press, Churchill's letter led Roosevelt to break the logjam:

The moment approaches when we shall no longer be able to pay cash for shipping and other supplies. While we will do our utmost, and shrink from no proper sacrifice to make payments across the Exchange, I believe you will agree that it would be wrong in principle and mutually disadvantageous in effect, if at the height of this struggle, Great Britain were to be divested of all salable assets, so that after the victory was won with our blood, civilisation saved, and the time gained for the United States to be fully armed against all eventualities, we should stand stripped to the bone. Such a course would not be in the moral or the economic interests of either of our countries.⁹⁶

Two days after receiving Churchill's letter, Roosevelt conceived Lend-Lease. It was an attempt to avoid direct loans, to entirely "get away from the dollar sign," in Roosevelt's words. He described the process of Lend-Lease to his Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau: "[We will] say to England, we will give you the guns and ships that you need, provided that when the war is over you will return to us in kind the guns and ships that we have loaned to you."⁹⁷ This was a much bigger step than the Destroyers for Bases agreement had been. The U.S. would forgo receiving anything in return for the war material given to Great Britain until after the war. And the armaments to be given to Great Britain could not be explained away as old and unnecessary to U.S. defense, as had been the 50 World War I destroyers. Instead, the U.S. would be giving newly-made weapons, ships, and planes to the British. This would be "something brand new," as Roosevelt described in his December 17 press conference.⁹⁸

Because Lend-Lease was going to involve significant changes to American laws, Roosevelt could not subvert Congress as he had with the Destroyers for Bases agreement.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Letter from Winston Churchill to Franklin Roosevelt, December 8, 1940 in Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume Two: Their Finest Hour* (London: Mariner Books, 1986), 475-82.

⁹⁷ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 255.

⁹⁸ Press Conference #702, Executive Offices of the White House, December 17, 1940.

⁹⁹ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 253.

However, just as at the beginning of Destroyers for Bases, he first pitched the idea of Lend-Lease to the press during a routine press conference in order to gauge their response. Roosevelt began by stressing the benefits to America that would come from aiding Great Britain, just as he had stressed the naval and air bases the U.S. would gain in the exchange with the British in

September:

In the present world situation of course there is absolutely no doubt in the mind of a very overwhelming number of Americans that the best immediate defense of the United States is in the success of Great Britain in defending itself; and that, therefore, quite aside from our historic and current interest in the survival of democracy, in the world as a whole, it is equally important from a selfish point of view of American defense, that we should do everything to help the British Empire defend itself.¹⁰⁰

By emphasizing the benefits of aiding the British to American security Roosevelt hoped to quell any isolationist response, but he spent far less time attending to that possible reaction than he had in previous discussions of his desire to aid the British.

Still, not wishing the idea to sound too much like a departure from present foreign policy, Roosevelt provided a folksy analogy of one neighbor lending another his garden hose to help put out a fire:

Now what do I do? I don't say to him before that operation, "Neighbor, my garden hose cost me \$15, you have to pay me \$15 for it." What is the transaction that goes on? I don't want \$15 – I want my garden hose back after the fire is over.¹⁰¹

Roosevelt wished to lend Great Britain munitions on the same principle understanding. The analogy he constructed was clearly included to give the press a simple way to explain the measure to the American people. And while the President emphasized that the legal questions of the arrangement had yet to be worked out, and that American arms production would have to increase both for national defense and to aid the British (in and of itself a measure of national defense) he maintained his line that this would not take the country into war. It was instead a

¹⁰⁰ Press Conference #702.

¹⁰¹ Press Conference #702.

moral action, illustrated by a simple example, a framework for a moral economy of neighborliness.

Q: The question I have is whether you think this takes us any more into the war than we are?

The President: No, not a bit

Q: Even though goods that we own are being used?

The President: I don't think you go into a war for legalistic reasons; in other words, we are doing all we can at the present time.¹⁰²

The President's claim that countries do not go to war for "legalistic" reasons referred back to the moral language he used. Roosevelt did not want the press to focus on the legal details of aiding Great Britain – some of which had not yet been worked out – but on the moral imperative to help one's neighbor instead. While the legal specifics of lending war ships might not cause a country to join a war, the moralistic sentiment behind that loan might very well.

The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune* all relayed Roosevelt's message to their readers. The *Times* told the story directly, emphasizing how the President "put all accent on material instead of money" and promised not only "all out for Great Britain" but "aid for ourselves also."¹⁰³ The *Post* added embellishments more typical of the *Times*' journalistic style, describing the President as "bronzed and confident after his fortnight's Caribbean cruise," but still dutifully retold "The Parable of the Fire Hose" and reiterated that the President did not believe that this aid would bring the country any closer to war.¹⁰⁴ The *Tribune* was even fairly mild. While it did stress the extent of American support – the subheadline of the article was "Rent England Anything it Needs, Says President" – the piece included how the President expected America to benefit, and cited Roosevelt's neighborly example.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Press Conference #702.

¹⁰³ Arthur Krock, "The New Production Scheme for British Aid," *New York Times*, December 18, 1940.

¹⁰⁴ George Bookman, "President Says Program Would Eliminate 'Silly, Foolish Dollar Sign,' Call for No Johnson Act Change," *Washington Post*, December 18, 1940.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Trohan, "New F.D.R. Aid Great Britain Plan," *Chicago Tribune*, December 18, 1940.

Beyond these articles the papers did not cover the President's press conference announcement. None ran an editorial about the possibility of all aid to Great Britain short of war, not even the isolationist *Tribune*, and while the *Times* had two further short articles late in the paper about the issue – one a report from London on British support for the President's plan; one a piece on Clare Boothe Luce's support of the measure and the President – the newspaper response did not match the level of involvement the Roosevelt administration was devoting to the new plan.

“The Great Arsenal of Democracy”

Twelve days later, on December 29, 1940, Roosevelt used a Fireside Chat to encourage support for all aid short of war. In the twelve-day interim between his press conference and the chat, the administration had continued with preparations for Lend-Lease. Primary among these was a major change in defense planning; on December 20 Roosevelt created the Office of Production Management, which streamlined military and civilian production.¹⁰⁶ The creation of the OPM showed that the President was serious enough about his plan to create the infrastructure to implement it. With some of the more practical matters now addressed, Roosevelt turned to his most direct and unmediated tool for reaching the people – the Fireside Chat, the first of his third term – and spoke to them directly.

The President began by turning to history – the tactic he had used in announcing the Destroyers for Bases agreement to the press when he recalled the Louisiana Purchase – to emphasize the importance of the current crisis. He alluded first to eight years earlier, when he was preparing to give his Fireside Chat on the banking crisis, declaring, “We met the issue of 1933 with courage and realism. We face this new crisis – this threat to the security of our nation

¹⁰⁶ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 256.

– with the same courage and realism.” Roosevelt then cast further back in history, stating, “Never before since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock has our American civilization been in such danger as now.”¹⁰⁷ In earlier drafts the speech reached even further back into history, declaring the American people to be “the heir of twenty centuries of faith in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man” while “this year for the first time in our history, that Christian civilization is in danger.”¹⁰⁸ In choosing the arguably less dramatic parallel, the President actually more firmly rooted the crisis in the trajectory of American democracy, which would resonate more with contemporary listeners.

With the gravity of the situation established, Roosevelt went on to declare what he believed the country should do. Freed from the constraints of the campaign and his reluctance to speak about anything but peace, Roosevelt directly addressed the 40 percent of the country who continued to think it more important to keep out of war than to aid England. He turned their argument on its head, arguing himself that aid to England was the way to stay out of war:

I make the direct statement to the American people that there is far less chance of the United States getting into war, if we do all we can now to support the nations defending themselves against attack by the Axis than if we acquiesce in their defeat, submit tamely to an Axis victory, and wait our turn to be the object of attack in another war later on.

If we are to be completely honest with ourselves, we must admit that there is risk in any course we may take. But I deeply believe that the great majority of our people agree that the course that I advocate involves the least risk now and the greatest hope for world peace in the future.¹⁰⁹

Finally, Roosevelt turned to the need for increased defense production. After appealing to both labor and management, Roosevelt then appealed to his listeners as a whole:

We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, December 29, 1940.

¹⁰⁸ Second Draft, Radio Address of the President, December 29, 1940, Papers of Samuel I. Rosenman.

¹⁰⁹ Roosevelt, Fireside Chat.

¹¹⁰ Roosevelt, Fireside Chat.

America Tunes In

The speech was one of the most successful the President ever gave. An opinion poll showed that 80 percent of those who heard or read the talk expressed approval, with only 12 percent opposed. Furthermore, 76 percent knew about the chat – the largest number ever recorded as being aware of a Roosevelt speech.¹¹¹ Reporters tuned in in great numbers as well. The *New York Times*' page one story declared that Roosevelt found "little opposition even among the isolationists," and continued by saying:

Some who commented regarded the speech as a virtual announcement that America was in the war, and must win it, and accordingly were apprehensive as to whether future developments might not push this country beyond the 'short of war' barrier which has been erected in front of all the Administration's defense policies and assistance to Great Britain.¹¹²

Among those apprehensive people the *Times* quoted were Senator Burton Wheeler of Montana, a significant isolationist politician, and Senator Arthur Kapper of Kansas. But even these Senators did not disagree with the speech entirely. Kapper conceded, "I do not think we need to get into the war, but I am in accord with the President's ideas on the need for a strong defense program."¹¹³

The *Times* did include two pieces describing more vehement disagreement with the President's Fireside Chat, but these were local in scope. The first was a piece on Verne Marshall, editor of the Iowa newspaper *The Cedar Rapids Gazette* and chairman of the two-week-old No Foreign War Committee calling for a "fight" by the United States to stay out of the European war. The second was about the American Student Union wiring the President to protest against any evasion of the 1934 Johnson Act by lending material or extending credit to England. (The Johnson Act prohibited foreign nations in default from marketing bonds in the U.S.) The students called the war "imperialistic" and remembering how Woodrow Wilson campaigned for his

¹¹¹ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 257

¹¹² "Capital Prepares for Early Action," *New York Times*, December 30, 1940.

¹¹³ "Early Action," *New York Times*.

second term in 1916 on the platform “He Kept Us Out of War” when the U.S. entered World War I in early 1917, declared, “You can’t pull a Wilson on us.”¹¹⁴

Still, despite the diversity of opinion that existed within its pages, the *Times* had been completely won over by Roosevelt. Its editorial, “A Call to Action,” titled after a line from Roosevelt’s address, was so favorable it bordered on fawning compared to previous *Times* pieces. The paper praised the President for making “the sort of ‘fireside talk’ that only he can make,” and stating, “the overwhelming majority of the country will agree whole-heartedly with his central thesis.”¹¹⁵ The editorial concluded by stating that the time for questioning whether or not to aid Great Britain was over:

By bluntly announcing that he regards the anti-aggression pact signed by Germany, Italy and Japan as directed specifically against the United States, the President has put all three countries on notice that he regards them as potential if not actual enemies. Such a notice will be futile unless it is supported by an unmistakable acceleration of our own defense program. This has now become the nation’s central task.¹¹⁶

Both the President and the press had long regarded the nation’s central task to be that of deciding the question of isolationism versus internationalism. But in winning a third term the President moved beyond this question and started to act more assertively internationally, and in this editorial the *Times* moved into the particularities of an internationalist policy, rather than sticking to the question of whether it was the correct path or not.

The *Washington Post*’s editorial also supported the President’s speech. It praised the President’s “exposition and declaration” and “plain language,” saying, “with more logic than has been used in previous utterances, [Roosevelt] outlined the role for which we have been cast by our fellow democracies, no less than by our own policy. That role is for us to be ‘the arsenal of

¹¹⁴ “President Is Asked Not to Aid Great Britain,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1940.

¹¹⁵ “A Call to Action,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1940.

¹¹⁶ “Call to Action,” *New York Times*.

democracy.”¹¹⁷ The *Post*’s comment about the President being more logical than he had been previously was echoed by other papers: The *New York Herald Tribune* called the President’s address “one of the greatest efforts of his career [...] superb in its directness, its realism, its courage and its purpose.”¹¹⁸ The papers that took issue with the speech did so not on its position, but with its details. Some wished for more specificity beyond Roosevelt’s call for more airplanes and more ships. Some also pointed out that while the President had spoken well, he had articulated no new policy. But these qualms were limited compared to the isolationist arguments of the past.

Still, the *Chicago Tribune* did respond unfavorably, leveling general, sweeping criticism against the President’s address in its editorial:

Now that the election is out of the way and the third term is about to begin the persons who are determined that America should make war and not keep the peace are turning on the heat. They have nothing to fear politically now. The only thing the people can do is to protest and most of them are far away from the Washington scene where the decision will be made. It may be assumed that Mr. Roosevelt will pay very little attention to any display of public opinion or sentiment which opposes his own intentions. In his own opinion, his own program, whatever it may develop into, was approved Nov. 5. For whatever he does he will say he has a mandate.¹¹⁹

This critique spoke directly to the perceived threat of unchecked and expanded presidential power. Now that Roosevelt had nothing to fear politically, having secured four more years in office, the *Tribune* worried he would forgo public opinion entirely and simply follow his own agenda.

But delivering a Fireside Chat was the best way Roosevelt had of communicating directly with the people, and speaking to reporters twice a week during press conferences was the best means through which the President could gauge public opinion. After his re-election Roosevelt did not cease using either of these tools. If anything, he made better use of the press conferences

¹¹⁷ “Clearing the Air,” *Washington Post*, December 30, 1940.

¹¹⁸ “U.S. Press, in General, Praises President’s Fireside Address,” *Washington Post*, December 30, 1940.

¹¹⁹ “These Critical Times,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 1940.

after his election than he had before. Roosevelt would need Congress' approval of the Lend-Lease bill and full authority to provide help to the British. He would pitch the idea during his State of the Union address at the beginning of 1941, but he told Treasury Secretary Morgenthau right from the beginning, "We don't want to fool the public, we want to do this thing right out and out."¹²⁰ As the debate over Lend-Lease began in Congress, Roosevelt gleaned public opinion from reporters and worked to alter the bill according to public demand, crafting aid to Great Britain in tandem with the support of the American public.

¹²⁰ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy* 257.

Chapter 3: January-March 1941

Bolstered by the largely positive response to his December 29 1940 Fireside Chat and the mandate he had received in the 1940 election, Roosevelt rapidly pushed forward with his plans for an expansion of the country's international role. While Treasury officials were drafting a Lend-Lease bill, which would allow the President to lend arms at his discretion to any ally, Roosevelt used his State of the Union Address to Congress on January 6, 1941 to outline the details of his desired program. Roosevelt made the case that, "Today it is abundantly evident that American citizens everywhere are demanding and supporting speedy and complete action in recognition of obvious danger."¹²¹ This broad-sweeping claim did precisely what the *Times* November 10 editorial had enjoined the President not to do; the editorial had urged that he recognize in the huge minority vote polled in the election by Willkie a sign of "healthy opposition to some of the methods and some of the objectives of the Administration."¹²² The President still depended on public opinion to support his actions, but now he was taking a more proactive role in channeling public opinion, rather than letting it determine the limits of his policy. Roosevelt was now fully prepared, in fact eager, to answer questions and defend his views during press conferences when he previously had held back from doing so. As a result, the debate in Congress and in the press over Lend-Lease was vigorous until the Lend-Lease Act was passed, and brought an end to America's isolationist position.

Roosevelt's public activism began with his State of the Union address. As he went forward with his objectives for Lend-Lease he described them in language that had previously proved popular. In his December 29 Fireside Chat he had declared that America must become

¹²¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union, January 6, 1941.

¹²² Meyer Berger, *The Story of the New York Times 1851-1951* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 444.

“the great arsenal of democracy.”¹²³ In the State of the Union he returned to this theme: “Our most useful and immediate role is to act as an arsenal for [the allies] as well as for ourselves. They do not need man power, but they do need billions of dollars worth of the weapons of defense.”¹²⁴ Roosevelt then took the money question off the table in favor of an argument similar to the one he had used to justify Destroyers for Bases:

I recommend that we make it possible for those nations to continue to obtain war materials in the United States, fitting their orders into our own program. Nearly all their material would, if the time ever came, be useful for our own defense.¹²⁵

But instead of justifying internationalism in terms of what other countries could do for America, as he had in the lead-up to Destroyers for Bases, when he stressed the strategic importance of the British bases above all else, Roosevelt now emphasized all production as beneficial to American defense, regardless of which country ultimately obtained the material.

Unlike previous announcements, in which there had been a delay between the announcement of a particular policy and its enactment – during which the press had been able to evaluate the President’s proposal – Lend-Lease went from speech to bill in just four days. There were three press conferences in this brief interim, one of which was specifically a budget conference; in fact, the President’s announcement at the State of the Union was not discussed beyond its budgetary ramifications. On January 10, 1941, the day after the President had asked Democratic leaders for a bill that would not limit either the amount or the kind of aid he could send, those leaders introduced just such a bill into Congress. Designated H.R. 1776 and entitled “An Act To Further Promote the Defense of the United States, and for Other Purposes,” the bill

¹²³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, December 29, 1940.

¹²⁴ Roosevelt, State of the Union.

¹²⁵ Roosevelt, State of the Union.

authorized the President to transfer any material to any country, and to decide what kind of repayment should be considered satisfactory.¹²⁶

“Dictator Bill” or Necessary Authority?

The press reacted strongly to the executive power granted by these provisions. The *Chicago Tribune*'s front page headline declared “Senators to Fight FDR Bill,” followed by a sub headline of “Scheme Called a Dictatorship and War Move.”¹²⁷ (The *Tribune* would continue to call Lend-Lease the “Dictator Bill” through its passage.) In its editorial, the *Tribune* warned not against supporting Great Britain, but against granting Roosevelt that much power, claiming that in “this era of superstate and the submissive subject... American liberties are in greater danger from forces here than anywhere else.”¹²⁸ The “era of superstate and submissive subject” could certainly apply to the threat of fascist governments abroad, but the *Tribune* did not consider these developments relevant to the situation at hand. The paper repeatedly claimed that Hitler did not pose a grave enough threat to America to necessitate the country aiding Great Britain in the war effort, but it was willing to compare Roosevelt to a dictatorial leader and a threat to America. The “superstate” the paper invoked was the American post-New Deal state; McCormick had half-heartedly supported Roosevelt before the bulk of his New Deal administrations were created. Once Roosevelt established the National Recovery Administration in 1933 however, *Tribune* coverage soured.

The *Times* reported the story very differently. Its front page headline read “President Calls for Swift Action,” and included a reference to Roosevelt’s press conference before the measure was introduced in Congress, in which he himself had argued, “some one had to have

¹²⁶ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 258.

¹²⁷ Chesley Manly, “Senators to Fight FDR Bill,” *Chicago Tribune* January 11, 1941.

¹²⁸ “The Superstate and the Subject,” *Chicago Tribune* January 11, 1941.

authority to act quickly in this world crisis.”¹²⁹ The *Times*’ editorial agreed with Roosevelt’s starting claim from his State of the Union:

An overwhelming majority of the American people are convinced that the success of Great Britain in this war is essential to the security of the United States. They intend that the material resources of this nation shall be made available to Great Britain promptly enough, and on a large enough scale, to turn the tide of battle. Every available test of American opinion demonstrates to the hilt the truth of those two fundamental propositions.¹³⁰

This marked a dramatic change from how the paper had been reporting just a few months earlier. The *Times* had, after all, supported Willkie in the 1940 election. And while the editorial went on to call attention to the same issues raised by the *Tribune*, the *Times* did not call this power dictatorial, brushing off any worry by stating, “Fortunately, the Administration is not committed to the details of this particular measure [i. e., giving the President undivided authority] by anything more than time required for its preparation.”¹³¹ The *Times* raised practical concerns about the policy rather than any issues of principle relating to the President’s position. And Roosevelt, eminently pragmatic, responded to those concerns and accepted several amendments to the bill before signing it into law.¹³²

The *Times* closed by making its most important point, the one that showed the evolution of ideas over the last six months: “Fortunately too, there’s a wide area of agreement in Congress on the fundamental issue, and every evidence of a desire to face the question promptly and realistically.”¹³³ In the *Times*’ take, it was not a question of whether Lend-Lease would pass, but when. In counterpoint to the *Tribune*’s headline about senators opposing the bill, the *Times* included a piece in which the two Democratic majority leaders – Senator Alben W. Barkley and

¹²⁹ “President Calls for Swift Action,” *New York Times* January 11, 1941.

¹³⁰ “The President’s Bill,” *New York Times* January 11, 1941.

¹³¹ “President’s Bill,” *New York Times*.

¹³² Restrictions on the bill included: a time limit on executive authority; a requirement for periodic reports to Congress; consultations with army and navy chiefs before disposing of defense equipment; and a proviso that nothing in the bill sanctioned executive use of the navy to transfer Lend-Lease goods. Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 259.

¹³³ “President’s Bill,” *New York Times*.

Representative John McCormack – interpreted its provisions for providing aid to Great Britain. While both papers turned to partial representatives, their different ways of framing the congressional conflict over Lend-Lease set the stage for the debate that would ensue.

In terms of press opinion the *Tribune* had more papers in its camp than the *Times*. In the *Times* roundup of press views 12 papers' editorials were quoted; only four were supportive, while the other eight ranged from caution to sharp questioning.¹³⁴ However the ground on which these papers criticized the bill was its sweeping executive power, rather than the fact that it would involve the country further in the war. The trajectory of the *Times* was therefore mostly representative of the press at large.

The Two-Way Street

While Congress debated Lend-Lease, the President did his best to privately direct administration strategy. He asked the Century Group to lobby for the measure, helped draft part of Secretary of State Cordell Hull's testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and continued to argue for the bill in his twice-weekly press conferences.¹³⁵ Previously the President had refused to answer speculative questions about his internationalist agenda. In January and February of 1941, while not exactly forthcoming with quotable details, Roosevelt responded more readily to reporters' questioning. For example, in a January 21 press conference, a reporter asked him a question about the U.S. convoying ships delivering Lend-Lease goods to Great Britain – a heavily contested issue that was ultimately restricted in the final version of the bill.

The President offered a forthright response:

Question: Mr. President, in the consideration of the lend-lease bill on the Hill they are constantly referring to the possibility of convoying ships; is that likely in the near future.

¹³⁴ "Press Views on British Aid Bill," *New York Times* January 11, 1941.

¹³⁵ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 258.

The President: I think I said the other day I had never even considered it in any way at all, because – of course I will have to give you this off the record – I mean this can't – it's got to be – Oh, I suppose, background, as long as you don't attribute it to anybody.

Obviously, when a nation convoys ships, either its own flag or another flag, through a hostile zone, just on the doctrine of chance there is apt to be some shooting – pretty sure that there will be shooting – and shooting comes awfully close to war, doesn't it?

Question: Yes, sir.

The President: You can see that that is about the last thing we have in our minds. If we did anything, it might almost *compel* shooting to start.¹³⁶

This exchange is notable for two reasons. Firstly, Roosevelt stumbled over his words more than usual in his attempt to respond, perhaps because he was offering information that he was not used to supplying. This stumbling may well have been a deliberate device to build rapport, and inflect a message subtly. Even if he did not allow his position to be quoted directly, it still affected how the story was reported. Secondly, while the President mainly provided background to the issue rather than his opinion on it, he did make a very clear statement against convoying. By speaking to the press twice a week the President learned what was at stake and what he needed to do to make Lend Lease palatable to the public. The reporter who asked about the convoying of ships was asking a much more serious question about the possibility of political slippage into war. To a large extent this was why Lend-Lease was so hotly contested; it committed America to nations at war in a way many considered tantamount to entering the war.

But as Roosevelt became more forthcoming, so did his opponents in the newspaper industry. McCormick testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee against Lend-Lease on February 6. Despite his intense dislike of Roosevelt, McCormick stated that he was not there to comment on the presidential plan to aid Great Britain, but instead to refute what he called “hysterical reports” of an impending Nazi invasion of the Western Hemisphere.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Press Conference #712, Executive Offices of the White House, January 21, 1941.

¹³⁷ Smith, *The Colonel*, 402.

Attacking Lend-Lease supporters' main argument that the best way to keep America at peace was to ensure that Great Britain did not fall to the Nazis, McCormick offered historical examples he claimed proved that Hitler would not be able to invade the Americas. Roosevelt – who similarly deployed historical examples in his arguments – disregarded McCormick's influence.

In the next day's press conference, a reporter asked about the publisher's testimony:

Question: Mr. President, Colonel McCormick said before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday that the geographical and strategical position of the United States is such that any talk of foreign invasion was ridiculous;–

The President: I want to ask you one question back: Did he speak as an expert? (Laughter)¹³⁸

The President had been poking fun at McCormick in press conferences since he assumed office in 1933 so it is hard to say whether Roosevelt viewed McCormick's testimony as an actual threat.¹³⁹ Since the 1936 election, when the *Tribune* abandoned impartiality and came out against the President in its coverage, the paper struggled to be viewed as an objective source where Roosevelt was concerned.¹⁴⁰

McCormick did not win many followers, as the House approved the bill on February 8 by a vote of 260 to 165.¹⁴¹ With safe majorities in both houses, Roosevelt had reason to be confident, yet he was still concerned his Senate opponents, whom the *Tribune* was quoting at every turn, might use a filibuster to delay enactment. The President responded directly to opposition in the Senate: When Senator Wheeler declared that Lend-Lease was “the New Deal's triple A foreign policy; it will plow under every fourth American boy,” Roosevelt not only argued against Wheeler's claims, which centered around the belief that Roosevelt would use the Navy for convoying, putting American sailors in great danger, but also called Wheeler's remark

¹³⁸ Press Conference #716, Executive Offices of the White House, February 7, 1941.

¹³⁹ Smith, *The Colonel*, 327.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *The Colonel*, 346.

¹⁴¹ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 259.

“the most untruthful [...] dastardly, unpatriotic thing that has ever been said.”¹⁴² So much of Roosevelt’s engagement in this debate was through his language, which was quoted in the press or at least influenced coverage. When the President decided to employ heightened rhetoric, it was a signal that the stakes had been raised.

Roosevelt had more techniques than rhetoric up his sleeve, however. He had appointed his former opponent, Republican Wendell Willkie, as a special emissary to Great Britain. This political maneuvering proved effective, for when Willkie returned from London on February 10, he went straight to the Hill, where he warned Republicans that unless they renounced isolationism, they might “never again hold the levers of power in America.”¹⁴³ Willkie proved a more convincing speaker than McCormick, and his report helped shift the debate in Congress.

Meanwhile, as plans for Lend-Lease developed, Roosevelt continued to be forthcoming in his press conferences. On February 18th he announced that Averell Harriman would go to Great Britain as defense expediter, to assist in the transfer of material under “the lend-spend, lend-lease – whatever you call it – bill” (Roosevelt was evidently feeling loose that afternoon; here the press conferences being off the record worked very much to his advantage, as such a quote could well have been ammunition for the President’s opponents.)¹⁴⁴ Harriman would go on to become a trusted advisor of Churchill and help foster the connection between the British Prime Minister and the U.S. President. Roosevelt anticipated the questions that reporters would ask about Harriman’s appointment and instead of shrugging them off, showed he had prepared in advance to answer them. For instance, he shared that he came up with the title of Expediter because he knew the press would ask for one and had answers to their inevitable questions

¹⁴² Dallek, 259. Wheeler’s “triple A” comment refers to the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) a New Deal policy that was met with some criticism, and found unconstitutional in 1936.

¹⁴³ Smith, *The Coonel*, 403.

¹⁴⁴ Press Conference #719, Executive Offices of the White House, February 18, 1941.

regarding the permanence of Harriman's position and how Lend-Lease contracts would be organized. Hence when a reporter did indeed ask the President a specific question about the repayment mechanism of Lend-Lease, Roosevelt responded directly: "I can tell you exactly what happened yesterday or the day before, when I was talking about this thing."¹⁴⁵

The President went on to give a lengthy explanation of columns and categories, outlining the delivery and repayment scheme of Lend-Lease as it stood, and showing that he had thought through what goods the British needed first and most. By shining light on policy decisions that were usually made behind closed doors, the President could ensure that Lend-Lease was a real policy, not simply a cover to enter the war, and at the same time make certain that continued coverage of the proposed act would be featured in the papers. And because Roosevelt answered reporters' questions, this coverage was all the more detailed. The *Post* and the *Times* recounted details the next day, not only about how Harriman had been named to go to Great Britain, but also how the President, wanting to aid the British as soon as he was able, had made lists of the materials both the U.S. and the British would need in order to increase production. This detailed coverage proved that when the President told his Treasury Secretary Morgenthau "We don't want to fool the public, we want to do this thing right out and out," he meant it.¹⁴⁶

The *Tribune* carried a completely different set of stories, mostly focusing on the reasoning of those remaining Republican Senators who opposed the bill, but the paper also received a scolding letter to its editor that showed its critiques were losing their punch. The paper most likely printed the letter so that it might appear impartial. Entitled "Terror Stricken," the letter was from a Republican mother who accused the paper's anti-Roosevelt agenda outright: "I sometimes wonder if you are really for the United States of America or if you are doing your

¹⁴⁵ Press Conference #719.

¹⁴⁶ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 257.

best to tear this country apart, as France was torn apart and thrown to the Nazis.”¹⁴⁷ The *Tribune* was still calling Lend-Lease the “Dictator Bill,” so the comparison to a Nazi agenda was heavily freighted. The woman continued:

Mr. Roosevelt, I am sure, has this country and its welfare foremost in his mind. I don't see how any one can be so blind as not to see that if England falls, and we have to fight along against the whole of Europe, then we would have these bombs falling in our own backyards. What good would our dollars do us then?¹⁴⁸

While one letter to the editor does not signal a change in public opinion as a whole, this woman's letter is important for two reasons. Firstly, it strikes against the *Tribune's* main argument that Colonel McCormick went down to Washington to argue. McCormick testified to the fact that there was no reason to connect Great Britain's fall and the possibility of America being invaded, but this woman clearly believed that the latter would follow in the event of the former. Secondly, she wrote, “I don't see how any one can be so blind.” The fact was that just a few months earlier people had been easily blinded to the importance of aiding Great Britain in the manner that Lend-Lease allowed. The shift in the opinion of the country stemmed from Roosevelt's new pro-activism and heightened moral language, incited by increasingly desperate calls from Churchill.

“Our President Is No Stronger and No More Powerful Than Our American Unity”

After many rounds of debate and several amendments (none of which vitiated the bill's central purpose) Lend-Lease became law on March 11 1941. The Senate voted for the bill 60 to 31; the House approved the Senate's revised version 317 to 71. Roosevelt signed the bill into law that afternoon.¹⁴⁹ Dallek claims that the President could have been assured of Senate approval without the added amendments, which “he felt compelled to accept [...] to assure the strong

¹⁴⁷ M.F.L., “Terror Stricken,” *Chicago Tribune* February 19, 1941.

¹⁴⁸ M.F.L., “Terror Stricken,” *Chicago Tribune*.

¹⁴⁹ Kimball, *Most Unsordid Act*, 220.

votes he wished.”¹⁵⁰ Kimball has argued that this shows Roosevelt’s desire for maximum public and Congressional support. He had just been elected to a four-year term, so his concern could hardly have been caused by a fear of defeat at the polls. Instead, Kimball concludes, “The only logical assumption is that the President was attempting to work within the democratic structure as fully as he could without endangering American national security.”¹⁵¹ In the face of complaints about his executive power, Roosevelt endeavored to show that the country’s democratic structure worked without him assuming unconstitutionally large levels of power. This explains, I would argue, why Roosevelt was so responsive to the press during the Lend-Lease debate. With internationalism and isolationism finally brought head-to-head in Congress, Roosevelt wanted internationalism to triumph decisively and that required both the understanding and support of the public.

With the Lend-Lease victory in his pocket, it is striking that the President returned to his less responsive ways during press conferences. During the March 11 afternoon conference – twenty minutes after the President had signed the bill into law – he made a statement to the press outlining the first list of material that would go to Great Britain. But he then refused to answer questions about it:

Question: Mr. President, you said you had a total of the value; are you going to tell us what it is?

The President: No.

Question: Mr. President, is this a lending or a leasing procedure?

The President: I give it up; I’m not interested.

Question: Do you have a system of bookkeeping set up, Mr. President?

The President: What?

Question: Do you have a system of bookkeeping set up to keep account of all this?

¹⁵⁰ Dallek, *American Foreign Policy*, 260.

¹⁵¹ Kimball, *Most Unsordid Act*, 240.

The President: I don't know.¹⁵²

Roosevelt could have been keeping quiet for several reasons. Perhaps these questions did not have answers yet; perhaps he was keeping his options open by not committing to one answer, or perhaps now that the bill was law, he no longer had to worry about winning public support and therefore did not have to answer the press' questions with the diligence that he had for the last two months. Regardless of the correct answer, now that Lend-Lease was law the President displayed a very different style in this press conference than he had just days before.

The change in the relationship between the press and President went both ways. Now that Lend-Lease was law, the press did not need the President to answer its speculative questions: reporters could go to the books and draw their own conclusions. The *Tribune* reacted predictably enough; the front page headline read "Dictator Bill Signed" and its editorial page declared, "Save Our Republic."¹⁵³ However these radical headlines created a problem for the *Tribune* with its fellow Chicago papers. The *Chicago Times*, run by Emory Thomason, the former general manager of the *Tribune*, had always existed peaceably in the shadow of the *Tribune*. But following McCormick's latest headline, the *Times* struck out, and cited German and Italian news reports containing praise for the *Tribune* and its stand against American warmongers.¹⁵⁴ While Lend-Lease may not have convinced McCormick to change the editorial tone of his paper (in fact, the end of his friendship with Thomason led the Colonel closer to Charles Lindbergh, the leader of the isolationist America First party) it did create severe trouble for him in the newspaper industry.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Press Conference #725, Executive Offices of the White House, March 11, 1941.

¹⁵³ "Dictator Bill Signed"; "Save Our Republic" *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1941.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *The Colonel*, 404.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *The Colonel*, 404.

The *Post* and the *Times*, on the other hand, no longer needed to defend the bill now that it had been passed. Instead of editorials urging support for the measure, both papers simply covered its passage as a news story. The *Post* injected some opinion into one of its midsection reports: a page eight article began by declaring “Few more historic measures have been put on our statute books than the bill which the President signed yesterday” and ended by stating “Our President is no stronger and no more powerful than our American unity.”¹⁵⁶ This last line countered any dictatorship claims. The paper argued that the President was at his most powerful when supported by Congress and the American people. The *Times*’ page one story similarly declared the bill “history-making.”¹⁵⁷ The *Times* addressed the questions the President would not answer in his press conference:

The President not only declined to reveal any of the items on the list of immediately transferable materials, but would not disclose the dollar-value, although he said that a calculation had been made on the basis of original costs. He gave assurances that details would be revealed if and when publication of the information would be of no military value to other countries from those intended to be benefited.¹⁵⁸

But, as this passage shows, the paper was not criticizing the President for his reticence; indeed, the article went on to cite other sources and create a comprehensive report of Lend-Lease’s first hours. While the President had returned to his cagey responses, coverage did not stop.

¹⁵⁶ “Lend-Lease Authority,” *Washington Post*, March 12, 1941

¹⁵⁷ Turner Catledge, “Final Step Swift,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1941

¹⁵⁸ Catledge, “Final Step Swift,” *New York Times*.

Conclusion

Four days after Lend-Lease was passed, Roosevelt spoke at the annual dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association. It was the first such dinner at which he had made a speech, although he had attended the event for the last eight years. In his address, Roosevelt played the crowd, recognizing the important role the press played in his presidency and that it had played in the Lend-Lease debate in particular. It is true that the President may have been particularly generous in giving credit to the assembled newspapermen because, as he recognized early in his speech, his address that night “differ[ed] from the press conferences that you and I hold twice a week, for you cannot ask me any questions tonight; and everything that I have to say is word for word ‘on the record.’”¹⁵⁹ But the speech, which mostly focused on American unity against the Axis powers, paid extra attention to the role of the press:

For eight years you and I have been helping each other. I have been trying to keep you informed of the news in Washington, of the Nation, and of the world, from the point of view of the Presidency. You, more than you realize, have been giving me a great deal of information about what the people of this country are thinking and saying.¹⁶⁰

In outlining the two-way relationship between himself and the press, Roosevelt showed how, perhaps indirectly and unwittingly, the press showed him what needed to be done to secure passage of Lend-Lease. By revealing to the President “what the people of this country are thinking and saying,” the press played a crucial role in American democracy. Unlike dictators abroad, Roosevelt responded to public opinion and altered his rhetoric and policies in accordance with the people's wishes.

The President did so while still maintaining his pragmatism and characteristic evasiveness, shifting positions until he felt he had enough support. Roosevelt's slow and careful effort to avoid controversial issues and questions he did not want to answer played a large role in

¹⁵⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address at the Annual Dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association, March 15, 1941.

¹⁶⁰ Roosevelt, Address at the Annual Dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association.

his press policy; it meant he needed the press for their insight into public opinion as much as reporters and publishers needed him in order to report the news. This partnership resulted in a democratic success – America’s newfound resolve to aid the Allies. Roosevelt declared:

Let not the dictators of Europe or Asia doubt our unanimity now [...] The world has been told that we, as a united Nation, realize the danger that confronts us—and that to meet that danger our democracy has gone into action.¹⁶¹

These sentences were packed with significance. Roosevelt directly attacked dictators abroad, and by repeating how a united America was a “democracy gone into action” emphasized that he could not be counted among their number.

However it had taken months for this unanimity to be reached; when the President first called for such action in his Charlottesville speech the previous June it had not materialized immediately. Roosevelt credited the press for the role it had played in transforming American public opinion over the interim months:

We have just now engaged in a great debate. It was not limited to the halls of Congress. It was argued in every newspaper, on every wave length, over every cracker barrel in all the land; and it was finally settled and decided by the American people themselves.¹⁶²

American democracy had worked. Roosevelt made good on his rhetorical flourishes; he did not just preach a public policy of internationalism, but by encouraging debate he had made it a functioning reality. Roosevelt’s level of engagement with the press showed that he believed in the democratic process. The press, in its role as the fourth estate, proved to be a crucial element within it. As Walter Lippmann wrote in his 1920 article “Journalism and the Higher Law,” “the news is the chief source of the opinion by which government now proceeds.”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Roosevelt, Address at the Annual Dinner of the White House Correspondents’ Association.

¹⁶² Roosevelt, Address at the Annual Dinner of the White House Correspondents’ Association.

¹⁶³ Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6.

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