

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on October 30, 2023.

Then As Now

On page 485 of the paperback edition of Doris Kearns Goodwin's Pulitzer Prize winning "No Ordinary Time: Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt - The Home Front in World War II," published originally in 1994 by Simon & Schuster, an apparent truth is written: "We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. 'Necessitous men are not free men.' People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made."

The speaker was Franklin Delano Roosevelt giving his State of the Union Address on January 11, 1944, at a time when the world was at war, when neither Nazi Germany nor Japan had yet to surrender. World War II is the context and background of this book about the man and wife of the title and their relationship to each other and the country that both of them served. There are many outstanding books about World War II, and I have told you about some of them before, but this one is mostly about the Roosevelts, a very personal account.

By the onset of World War II, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had reared their five surviving children, his romantic relationship outside of marriage had left its indelible mark, and Franklin had already been confined to life in a wheelchair by the crippling, unvaccinated polio of that time.

Perhaps the relationship was best described in Eleanor's own words in 1944 after a now older and weakened Franklin announced his candidacy for a fourth term as President: "The President doesn't discuss these things with me. Many people think he does but most often the first I know of some decision is when I see it in the papers" (p. 525). The marriage was still based on caring, but each was living very independently in the public eye, often apart because of frequent travel commitments for both. Eleanor had become a beloved and respected activist for many causes, for which she is remembered today.

One of the other closely knit relationships of the book is that of President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Early in the war, with Britain under extraordinary distress and lacking the capacity to meet its financial burden, Churchill mounted a sustained appeal for American support with badly needed materials of war, America being capable of manufacture in high volume like no other, much as today. If that sounds like an earlier Volodymyr Zelensky, it was. And that Congress, too, had resistance in its ranks; America was not yet at war, but Churchill was desperate.

Franklin Roosevelt came up with a workaround, known as the Lend-Lease Act, which passed in the Congress on March 11, 1941. It was based on "the unconventional idea that the United States could send Britain weapons and supplies without charge, and then, after the war, be repaid not in dollars but in kind." The Act worked to keep Britain equipped and in the fight against Nazi Germany, whereas the United States, which was at this early time in the war ill-prepared for combat, could keep Hitler at bay by proxy.

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on October 30, 2023.

Sound familiar? That and much more in this book will sound familiar if you give it a try. You have my strong recommendation to do so. You might find in it events and views that will make you feel that history is repeating itself, more than a generation later. Then as now.

Charles B. Greenberg,
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation