

# The Price of World Peace

Haunted by Wilson's failure, FDR taught future generations of leaders that absolute moral purity isn't the best way to reshape the world

BY PETER BEINART

**W**HEN IT COMES TO FOREIGN policy, liberals generally like leaders with brains. (Think Bill Clinton or Barack Obama.) Conservatives generally prize backbone. (Think Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush.) So what do we do with Franklin D. Roosevelt? He helped save the world from the greatest barbarism it has ever known and laid the foundation for the greatest run of peace and prosperity in history and yet by most accounts had neither intellectual heft nor a stiff spine.

It's a question that puzzled F.D.R.'s contemporaries as well. In 1931, during Roosevelt's first presidential campaign, the columnist Walter Lippmann warned that "he just doesn't happen to have a very good mind." The satirist H.L. Mencken called him "too feeble and wishy-washy a fellow to make a really effective fight." Yet this preppy, dilettantish mama's boy had something that his critics didn't appreciate: instinct. Once, as Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor were being driven through the New Mexico desert along a barren and featureless landscape that they had



YALTA: FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT LIBRARY; GLOBE: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY

A pipe-shaped pin marked Stalin's



daily whereabouts on F.D.R.'s wartime maps. A cigar stood for Churchill, a cigarette for


traversed only once before, they came to a fork in the road. Their driver, who lived in the area and had driven the route many times, could not remember which way to turn. F.D.R. spoke up immediately: "You go straight ahead."

It was instinct that helped F.D.R. find his way through a political labyrinth that was navigable by neither intellect nor principle alone. His basic problem as Nazism stalked Europe was that some Americans wanted to isolate themselves from the world while others wanted to remake it in America's image. Yet both paths, he believed, led nowhere. The U.S. could neither escape the world nor fully redeem it. F.D.R.'s task was to persuade his people to put their money and blood on the line, even though, despite their best efforts, the world would remain a nasty place.

This was the conundrum that had destroyed his old boss Woodrow Wilson, whom Roosevelt had served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. When Wilson led Americans into World War I, he told them they were abandoning their historical isolation in order to create a world in which the strong no longer menaced the weak. But at the Paris Peace Conference following the war, it became clear that the victorious European powers had no interest in birthing such a world. So when Wilson returned home trumpeting the newly created League of Nations, Americans asked why they should join an organization that might require the U.S. to again sacrifice its sons for a world that would not live by its principles. The Senate rejected the league, America returned to political isolation, and Wilson died a broken man.

Wilson's failure haunted F.D.R. When writing speeches, he often glanced at Wilson's portrait, which he'd had installed in the Cabinet Room. His efforts to escape Wilson's fate began even before the U.S. entered the war. As early as the fall of 1937, F.D.R. began hammering relentlessly on one theme. If Hitler's Germany and Tojo's Japan were allowed to rampage unchecked across Europe and Asia, America would eventually be in danger. The implication was clear. If the U.S. went to war again, it would be a war of necessity, not choice—not a war to remake the world but a war to protect the U.S.

At first, that proved a hard sell. Most Americans still believed they were safe behind their Atlantic and Pacific moats. But in 1940, when the Nazis overran France, public opinion began to shift, and by the summer of 1941, with Britain under



**Postwar planning** At Yalta in 1945, the Big Three formalized plans for occupation zones in Germany. Stalin, above right, also agreed to join the U.N.

F.D.R. kept this colossal globe

in the Oval Office. A gift from the U.S. Army, it showed where American troops were fighting

massive assault and German submarines sinking American ships, key advisers told F.D.R. that he could pressure Congress into declaring war. Yet in his gut, Roosevelt felt the timing wasn't right. He feared that unless he somehow showed Americans that the Axis powers were a threat not just to Britain and France—and not even just to American ships but also to Americans themselves—they would come to see World War II as philanthropy, not self-defense. And when the postwar world did not live up to their hopes, they would turn inward again. On Dec. 7, 1941, Japan solved F.D.R.'s problem by turning Pearl Harbor into an inferno. "Franklin," Eleanor commented, "was, in a way, more serene than he had appeared in a long time."

But F.D.R. was still not free from his labyrinth. It was Japan that had hit the U.S., not Germany, and he still suspected there were limits to the costs that the American people would bear, especially in Europe. He initial-

ly hoped the U.S. could avoid land fighting in Europe altogether and battle Hitler only in the air and at sea. Even after abandoning that idea, F.D.R. and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill delayed an Allied invasion of France until 1944. The result was that for almost three years, Soviet ground troops faced the Nazi meat grinder largely alone. F.D.R. was not unhappy about that. Yet there were consequences. By the time American boys stormed the beaches at Normandy, the Red Army was pushing through Eastern Europe toward Berlin.

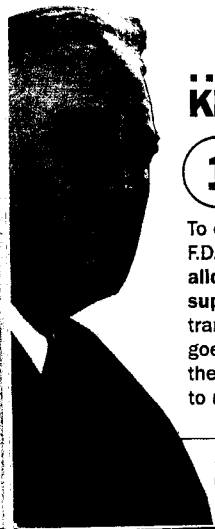
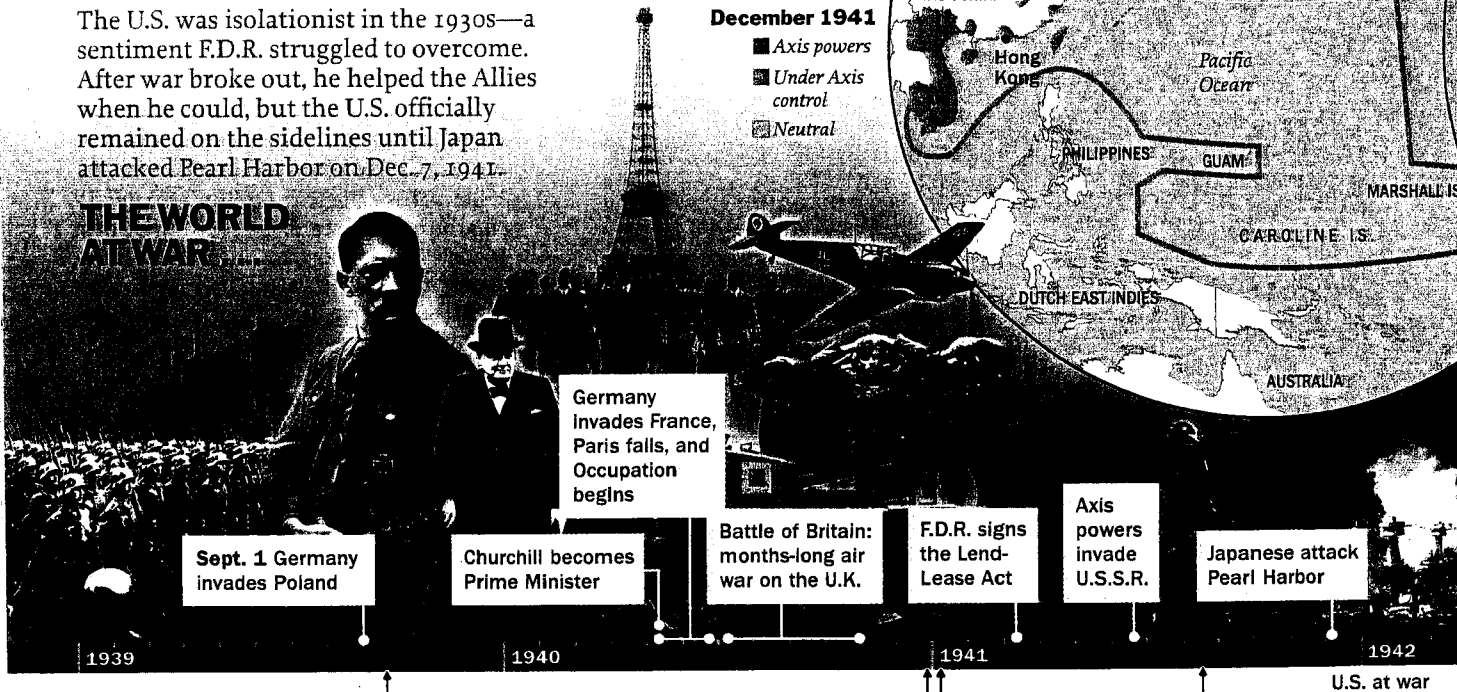
So when Roosevelt began discussing the shape of the postwar world with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and Churchill, first in Tehran in November 1943 and then in Yalta in February 1945, it was already becoming clear that Eastern Europe would probably fall under Moscow's thumb. He and Churchill got Stalin to promise that all nations would have the right to

choose their own postwar governments, but those lovely words meant little with Soviet tanks squatting on Polish soil.

Roosevelt knew there was not much he could do about this, and he didn't want to alienate Stalin, whose help he thought he would need for a future invasion of Japan. But he worried that when Americans became aware of the sphere of influence that Moscow was establishing in Eastern Europe, they would react with bitter disillusionment, as they had after World War I.

The U.S. was isolationist in the 1930s—a sentiment F.D.R. struggled to overcome. After war broke out, he helped the Allies when he could, but the U.S. officially remained on the sidelines until Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

**THE WORLD AT WAR**



**... AND FDR'S KEY DECISIONS**

**1 'Cash and Carry'**  
Sept. 21, 1939  
To circumvent the U.S.'s neutral stance, F.D.R. asks Congress to approve a plan allowing the Allies to buy arms and supplies if they pay cash and supply transport. The 1941 Lend-Lease Act goes further: the U.S. can now provide the Allies with any article deemed vital to national defense.

**2 'Arsenal of Democracy' Fireside Chat**  
Dec. 29, 1940  
Explaining why the Axis powers must be defeated and Britain and its allies defended at all costs, F.D.R. exhorts Americans to help churn out "more ships, more guns, more planes—more of everything." The ultimate goal, he says: "We must be the great arsenal of democracy."

**3 'Four Freedoms' State of the Union Address**  
Jan. 6, 1941  
F.D.R. describes his vision of a postwar world "founded upon four essential human freedoms": freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear. "Our strength is our unity of purpose. To that high concept there can be no end save victory."

Once Hitler and Tojo were vanquished, Americans might turn inward again.

By 1945, F.D.R.'s body was on the verge of collapse. His hands shook; his clothes hung off his emaciated frame. He spent his final months trying to entrench the U.S. in the newly created United Nations, so that even when Americans realized that the postwar world was not living up to their hopes, they could not flee from it. In this effort—there is no way to sugarcoat it—he lied. He told Congress that at Yalta

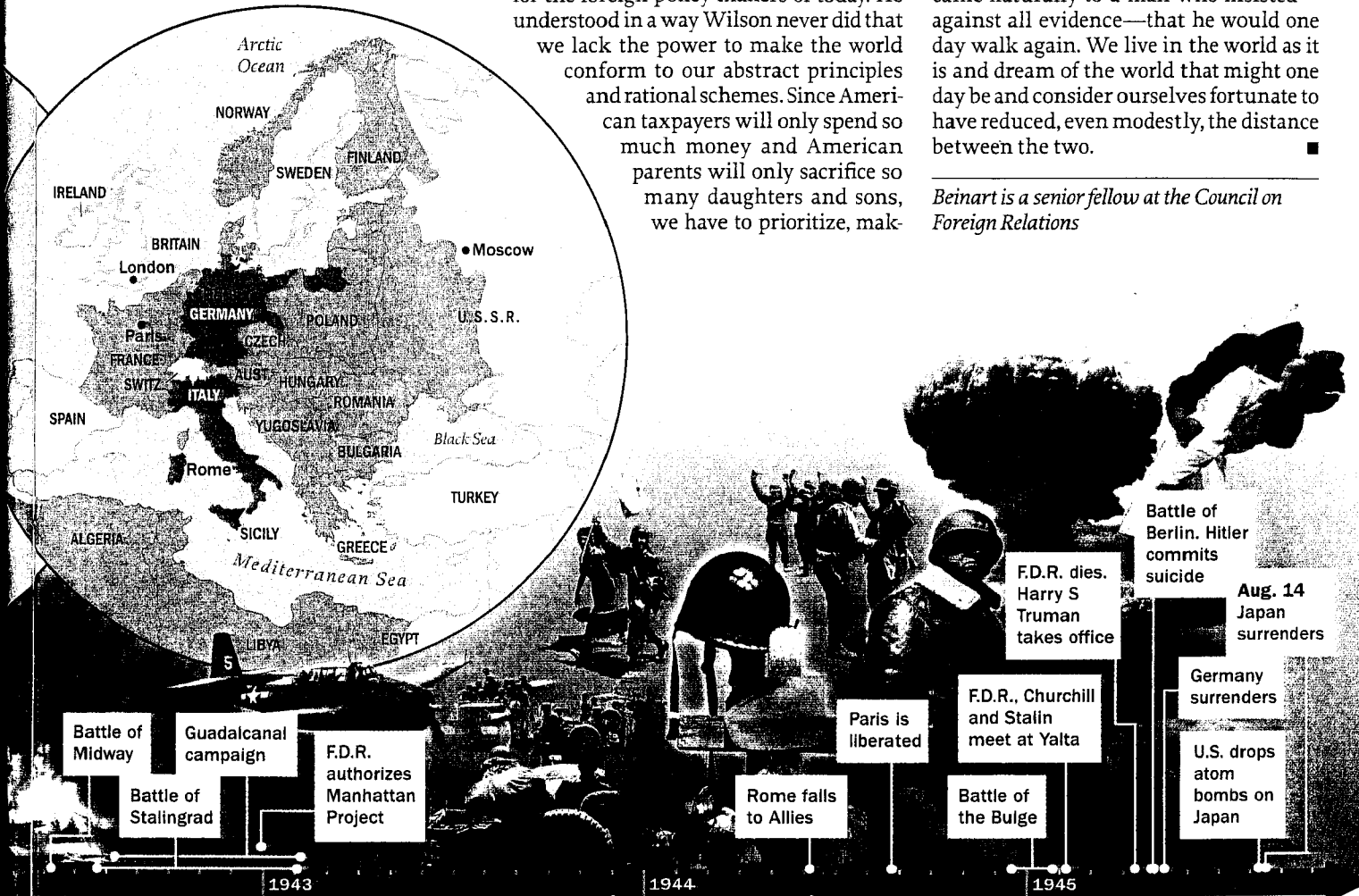
he and his fellow leaders had put an end to spheres of influence when, in fact, they had presided over the creation of one. On April 12, while posing for a portrait, F.D.R. suffered a massive stroke and died a few hours later. Three months after his death, his dream was fulfilled: the Senate ratified American membership in the U.N., thus exorcising Wilson's ghost.

"I didn't say the result was good," commented F.D.R. to a State Department official after Yalta. "I said it was the best I could do." Therein lies perhaps F.D.R.'s greatest lesson for the foreign policy makers of today. He understood in a way Wilson never did that we lack the power to make the world conform to our abstract principles and rational schemes. Since American taxpayers will only spend so much money and American parents will only sacrifice so many daughters and sons, we have to prioritize, mak-

ing the world a bit less ugly where we can and accommodating it where we must. Often we will have to enlist the help of nasty characters—like Stalin in the fight against Hitler or Iran in the struggle against al-Qaeda and the Taliban—to confront the gravest threats. Trying to remain morally pure will only permit even greater evil.

But that need not mean that we stop talking in moral terms. F.D.R. spoke eloquently of the world he hoped to see, even as he ruthlessly adapted himself to the one in which he actually lived. Perhaps that came naturally to a man who insisted—against all evidence—that he would one day walk again. We live in the world as it is and dream of the world that might one day be and consider ourselves fortunate to have reduced, even modestly, the distance between the two. ■

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**4 Atlantic Charter**  
Aug. 14, 1941

After meeting secretly on warships off Newfoundland, F.D.R. and Winston Churchill issue a declaration for the postwar world. Its eight points include calls for self-determination and free trade, which will result, indirectly, in the founding of the U.N. and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

**5 Tehran Conference**  
Nov. 28–Dec. 1, 1943

F.D.R. and Churchill agree to open a second European front to divert German troops from the U.S.S.R. They also assent to Joseph Stalin's bid to establish control over much of Eastern Europe—decisions that will open the way to the Cold War. In return, the Soviets pledge to help fight Japan once Germany is defeated.

**6 D-Day Invasion**  
June 6, 1944

Planned for more than a year, the Allies' massive invasion of Normandy involves some 160,000 troops, more than 5,000 ships and 13,000 aircraft on the first day alone. Thousands of men die in the initial assault on the French beaches, but the operation gives the Allies a foothold in France.

Sources: *World History: Perspectives on the Past*; *The World Almanac Book of World War II*  
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Graphic by Lon Tweeten