Header Image

From the Chair's Desk

Greetings from Bay State Road!

It's time for another round of updates on the comings and goings of the BU History Department and our alumni. Included in this newsletter are updates from some of our alumni on their lives, careers, and experiences at BU, as well as an article by one of our graduate students on FDR and the press.

We are always interested to hear what is happening with our alumni and how studying history at BU has impacted your career and life. I encourage you to contribute stories to share with the community of folks who have studied history at Bay State Road. Send stories, adventures, misadventures, cautionary tales, and any other material to me at ferleger@bu.edu.

Best wishes,

Louis Ferleger
Professor of History,
Chair, History Department

Alumni News:

Joseph Preston Baratta (Ph.D. 1982):

I received my Ph.D. from the department in 1982. I worked most closely with Sidney Burrell, John Armstrong, Bill Newman, and Arnold Offner. I researched and wrote a dissertation on the origins of the movement for world federal government of 1937-47. In my time at BU, at the height of the Cold War, there was very little international studies at the university, so I went all the way to the logical extreme of ideal visions of a world at peace under the rule of law. Later, I published a big, critical, documented history of the international federalist movement, The Politics of World Federation, Vol 1: United Nations, U.N. Reform, Atomic Control, Vol. 2: From World Federalism to Global Governance (Praeger, 2004). It was reviewed by Gary Ostrower in the Journal of American History and eight other places, including Italy. I believe there is a copy in Mugar Library, along with a couple other bibliographies of mine on a rather unworked field in our age of triumphant Realism, hesitant Internationalism, and daring Constructivism. I currently teach history and international relations at Worcester State University.

Jay Corrin (Ph.D. 1976):

Jay Corrin is a Professor of the Social Sciences in the College of General Studies at Boston University. He received his PhD from the History Department in Modern European and British History. He writes: "I've just published a study of the English Catholic New Left in CATHOLIC PROGRESSIVES IN ENGLAND AFTER VATICAN II (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013)."

Frederick Miller (M.A. 1961):

I came to BU in 1960 after graduating from Fairfield University and received my M.A. in history in 1961. Those were exciting times. I remember seeing Vice President and Pat Nixon when they came to Boston to campaign, and I was in the crowd outside of Boston Garden when John and Jackie Kennedy arrived the night before the election. Later, in 1961, I saw President Kennedy in his motorcade on his way to his birthday celebration at the armory on Commonwealth Avenue. That occasion was his first return to Boston as president. Robert Frost was present at our graduation ceremony at Boston Garden.

Taking a course and a seminar with Professor Kenneth Bernard developed in me a lifelong interest in the American Civil War. Since leaving BU I have pursued graduate work in history and government at New York University and have earned a J.D. from Fordham University School of Law.

I have taught history and government full-time at New York City Community College, CUNY, Brooklyn, N.Y. (now New York City College of Technology). I have also worked part-time in New York State at the University of the Air, Queens College, CUNY, the College of New Rochelle, and Concordia College, Bronxville; as well as in Connecticut at St. Basil's College, Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Fairfield University, and Sacred Heart University.

As a Democrat, I have served five terms as a member of the Stamford Board of Representatives (local legislative body), the last two as President. I have served one term as a member of the Connecticut House of Representatives, representing a portion of the City of Stamford. In Fairfield I have served four years on the Board of Assessment Appeals, the last two as Chairman.

I have retired as an Assistant Clerk of the Connecticut Superior Court for the Judicial District of Stamford-Norwalk. My wife, Louise Wood Miller, also a graduate of Fairfield University is retiring as Registrar of Fairfield Prep after working forty-two years at the school. I am very proud to be a graduate of the Boston University History Department and to have been inducted into the Delta Mu Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta.

The Press and FDR's Disability: Myths and Reality
By Matthew Pressman

NOTE: This article is adapted from the author's more detailed article in the September 2013 issue of The Journal of the Historical Society, *"Ambivalent Accomplices: How the Press Handled FDR's Disability and How FDR Handled the Press."*

This past July, a Franklin College professor doing research at the National Archives stumbled upon a film clip of President Franklin D. Roosevelt being pushed in a wheelchair on the deck of a Navy ship during World War II. Despite showing neither Roosevelt's face nor the wheelchair, the clip became an object of considerable public interest. It seems to represent a radically different era in American political life—one in which the president could rely on the press corps to help him hide something so glaringly obvious as the fact that he was a paraplegic—and this, in part, explains the public's fascination.

An *NBC Nightly News* report on the discovery stated that there was “a gentlemen’s agreement” between FDR and the press corps to hide the extent of his disability, and the Associated Press wrote that it was “virtually a state secret.” That has long been the conventional wisdom, repeated in countless books and articles. But it is inaccurate. In fact, the press sometimes described Roosevelt’s condition in great detail, and it took far more than a friendly understanding to minimize the visual impact of the president’s disability.

News photographers generally liked Roosevelt, perhaps because he was a terrific subject. Unlike his dour, stone-faced predecessors (Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge), FDR could be photographed grinning, shouting, swimming, eating peanuts, or kissing his wife. But Roosevelt and his team were not content to rely on goodwill alone to ensure that cameras would not capture him in ways that highlighted his disability—rather, the Secret Service enforced the rule. As *Editor & Publisher* reported in 1936, if agents saw a photographer taking a picture of Roosevelt, say, getting out of his car, they would seize the camera and tear out the film. “By what right they do this I don’t know,” the correspondent wrote, “but I have never seen the right questioned.” A 1946 survey of the White House photography corps confirmed this, finding that anyone the Secret Service caught taking banned photographs “had their cameras emptied, their films exposed to sunlight, or their plates smashed.”

However much individual photographers may have liked FDR, many of their bosses hated him. Several of the country’s most powerful publishers—media titan William Randolph Hearst, Time Inc. owner Henry Luce, *Chicago Tribune* boss Robert McCormick—believed he was a dangerous radical who had to be stopped, and they would not have abided by any gentlemen’s agreement with him. Indeed, in 1937 Luce’s *Life* magazine disregarded White House rules and published a photo of Roosevelt in a wheelchair. It was shot from a distance, and the figures are not identifiable, but the caption stated that this was the president. Roosevelt’s press secretary was furious and wanted to launch an investigation.

In many months of research into the press’s handling of Roosevelt’s disability, I found no other photographs published during his lifetime that showed his wheelchair. References to it in print, however, were more numerous (far more numerous than I expected when I began the project). A 1932 *New York Times Magazine* profile of the then-Governor of New York described how, at his Hyde Park home, he “wheels around in his chair”; another profile, this one in the *New Yorker* in 1934, stated that “he is almost always pushed to the west end of the White House in a small wheelchair.” That same year *Time*, an article about the renovation of the White House mentioned how FDR’s bodyguard “helped the

President into his wheel chair," then referred four more times to his being "wheeled" or "rolled." In a 1941 about Roosevelt, *Life* magazine noted that "by 11 o'clock he is up, dressed and on his way in a wheel chair down the long passageway to his office."

So why have the misconceptions about a gentlemen's agreement and a complete cover-up of FDR's disability endured for so long? Partly because there is an element of truth to them. The examples above notwithstanding, mentions of Roosevelt's wheelchair were extremely rare. Far more commonly, news coverage depicted him as someone who *had been* stricken by polio but who had triumphed over his affliction—which of course he had, despite the fact that he remained paralyzed. This was the image that FDR and his advisers wished to project, and they largely succeeded. For instance, less than a year after publishing the wheelchair photo, *Life* featured a full-page shot of a smiling FDR in an armchair, with a caption stating, "The man who triumphed over blighting physical affliction to become the happy leader of his country is assured of lasting rank among the heroes of the human spirit."

Roosevelt and his team did not try to *hide* his disability—they tried to spin it. And they were quite savvy. In 1930, when Roosevelt obtained valuable life-insurance policies attesting to his overall good health, he held a press conference to announce the insurance-company doctors' findings (one doctor told reporters that FDR's "chest expansion" was better than that of former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey). The following year, an article appeared in the mass-circulation magazine *Liberty* under the headline "Is Franklin D. Roosevelt Physically Fit to be President?" The answer was a resounding yes, although the author, Earle Looker, mentioned that FDR could only walk by using leg braces and a crutch or cane. While Looker described himself as a Republican who had issued Roosevelt a personal challenge to prove his physical fitness, in fact he was a friend of the Roosevelt family who had come up with the idea for the article in concert with Franklin and Eleanor.

Roosevelt also knew that if he asked for permission to approve or reject the text of a news article—especially as president—he could often get it. In 1936, for example, FDR's personal secretary, Missy LeHand, sent a telegram to the editor of *Liberty* telling him that the "chief" did not want certain material included in a forthcoming article—"particularly discussion of physical condition." The editor responded that "with great reluctance" he would cancel the story entirely. *New York Times* Washington bureau chief Arthur Krock, a frequent Roosevelt antagonist, admitted that the *Times* gave the White House editorial approval on a major article Krock wrote—they even got to approve the headline. The president's

advisers were “skilled publicity people” who “knew all the angles,” Krock said. Likewise, the Hearst-owned *Cosmopolitan* magazine gave Roosevelt the full text of an article about him in advance of publication and allowed him to make changes to it.

We in America have a tendency to romanticize the past as a simpler, rosier timeâ€”in this case, a time when the press was not out to get politicians, and when leaders were judged on their merits, not on their physical appearance or whether you’d like to have a beer with them. But as historical research often shows, the past was every bit as messy and complicated as our own era.

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