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## Book Review

“Roosevelt and Stalin”  
by Susan Butler, Knopf, \$35, 594 pages

## Dealing With Uncle Joe

*When FDR said that he hoped elections in Poland would be as pure as Caesar's wife, Stalin replied: "In fact she had her sins."*

## Big Two



Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin at the Yalta Conference, February 1945.  
Photo: Corbis Images

by Alonzo L. Hamby

**Eleanor Roosevelt's** protégé Joseph P. Lash, looking back years later, recalled a dinner at the White House in January 1942. Asked for his impression of Joseph Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt remarked, as Lash put it, “that Stalin had to rule a very backward people, which he thought explained a good deal.”

The remark, Lash observed, was of a piece with FDR's rationalizations of his friendly dealings with such dictators as Getúlio Vargas of Brazil. It also surely reflected Roosevelt's sense that most nations in the first half of the 20th century were controlled by authoritarian regimes. Partnerships with them, based on realistic understandings, seemed both possible and necessary.

Was the Soviet Union a run-of-the-mill dictatorship with which a partnership was possible? Was Stalin a Russian version of Vargas? In “Roosevelt and Stalin: Portrait of a Partnership,” Susan Butler implicitly answers both questions in the affirmative.

Ms. Butler, the editor of a valuable collection of the correspondence between Roosevelt and Stalin, sees their relationship as more important to 20th-century history than the one between Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Had the Stalin-Roosevelt “partnership” extended beyond the war's end, she contends, it would have created a harmonious postwar world in which there was no Cold War.

Roosevelt had opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1933 but had also episodically criticized the U.S.S.R. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, he quickly initiated a correspondence with Stalin and funneled American aid to him. Churchill, hitherto a vocal foe of Bolshevism, did the same. Both men realized that a fully engaged U.S.S.R. was essential to crushing Hitlerism and taming Japan. Both understood that, for such an alliance, there would be a price to pay in the form of postwar power arrangements. They hoped against hope that the price would not be too high.

Alliances between nations rest on shared interests rather than personal relationships. But wars concentrate power in the hands of leaders and give personalities more importance than they would have in peacetime. On the surface, the outstanding example of camaraderie during World War II was between Roosevelt and Churchill. But FDR understood that Britain was a declining power and that Churchill's cherished empire was on the verge of a collapse.

Roosevelt inevitably found it difficult to reconcile his own liberal belief in personal liberties and the self-determination of peoples—as codified, for instance, in the Atlantic Charter—with his wartime alliances. He frequently behaved as if Churchill's defense of his empire were a greater problem than Stalin's ambition to enlarge the Soviet sphere of dominance. “Dear old Winston,” the president clearly thought, was a man of the past. At a White House dinner two weeks after the one that Lash remembered, Roosevelt unmercifully hectoring Churchill about the empire, largely to make an impression on another guest, the liberal journalist Louis Adamic.

The president, in fact, believed that he and Stalin would be the arbiters of the future. Early on, he sought a one-on-one meeting with the Soviet leader in Alaska or some other mutually acceptable destination. Stalin, who at no time in his dictatorship ventured outside an area of Soviet military control, always declined.

Ms. Butler alludes all too briefly to a September 1943 meeting between Roosevelt and Archbishop (later Cardinal) Francis Spellman of New York, a prelate of great influence. FDR told the archbishop that he thought he could come to an understanding with Stalin and was better suited to do so than Churchill. He hoped, he said, to persuade the Soviet dictator to settle for predominant influence in Finland, the Baltic states, eastern Poland and a part of Romania. Russia had the power to take these regions anyway, he noted; it was best to concede them “gracefully.” He acknowledged that Soviet postwar influence could extend even farther—to Austria, Hungary, Croatia, possibly as far as France. Russia, he said, was an all but unstoppable force. Spellman paraphrased him saying: “The European people will simply have to endure the Russian domination.” Perhaps in 10 or 20 years, he said, the Russians would become less barbaric. Clearly Roosevelt, whatever his feelings about the British Empire, believed that the price of a stable postwar world was an expanded Soviet Empire.

The president’s first face-to-face encounter with Stalin occurred two months later, in a one-to-one meeting at the Teheran Conference. Roosevelt sought to gain Stalin’s confidence by vigorously affirming his hopes for the postwar dismantlement of the British and French empires, at one point declaring that the best solution for the future of India, as his “horrified” translator Charles Bohlen recalled it, “would be reform from the bottom, somewhat on the Soviet line.”

To demonstrate his good faith in Teheran, Roosevelt accepted an offer to lodge the American diplomats at the Soviet legation despite suspicions that their rooms would be bugged. (They were indeed.) Upon his return to the U.S., FDR declared: “At Tehran the Marshall [i.e., Stalin] and I got to know each other. We got on beautifully. We cracked the ice, if there ever was any ice; and since then there has been no ice.”

The second meeting came in February 1945 at Yalta, where Roosevelt hoped to pin down Soviet participation in the war against Japan, secure Soviet membership in the new United Nations and find a formula for dealing with the future of Eastern Europe. Stalin agreed to enter the Pacific war in return for territorial and economic concessions at the expense of not only Japan but also China. He secured three votes for the U.S.S.R. in the U.N.’s General Assembly. As for Eastern Europe, he was unyielding on practical matters of control but agreed to sign a declaration of democratic principles that had no real-world effect. When Roosevelt expressed the hope that elections in Poland would be as pure as Caesar’s wife, Stalin responded tellingly: “They said that about her but in fact she had her sins.”

Still, Roosevelt and most of the American delegation left Yalta feeling that they had secured the Soviets’ participation in a new world order. Within weeks, however, Stalin was accusing the U.S. of arranging a separate peace with Germany. In his last message to Stalin, on April 11, 1945, Roosevelt sharply rejected the accusation. In a note to Churchill, he remarked optimistically that problems always seemed to arise with the Russians but were always

straightened out. The next day, he died of a massive stroke, leaving the Russian problem to Harry Truman.

The “partnership” was thus tumultuous and uncertain. Ms. Butler covers it thoroughly if rather ploddingly. Occasionally she is weak on peripheral details, notably in her first chapter, where one is puzzled by a reference to “Spanish authorities on Gibraltar,” then as now a jealously guarded British possession. She also states that FDR had flown to the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 from Bathurst, Canada; the flight, the last leg of a circuitous journey, was from Bathurst, Gambia. The bulk of the book, however, is a solid, comprehensive account of Soviet-American relations during World War II. It founders only in its extraordinarily sunny view of the postwar potential for world peace.

As the end of the war approaches, Ms. Butler traces an arc of hope and disappointment. She portrays Stalin benignly seeking “a world where Russia would be safe to continue rebuilding itself.” Because of Stalin’s faith in FDR, she says, and because fostering world trade “was so important to FDR,” Stalin chose to be among the founders of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Even after FDR’s death, he hoped that the U.S. “would help Russia rebuild” by providing a significant loan, an idea that FDR had encouraged and then allowed to stall in early 1945. (“One can only speculate,” she writes, “that FDR thought the timing was wrong—that it was too early.”) The Russians waited, Ms. Butler reports, then “absolutely nothing happened.”

For Ms. Butler, nothing happened because Truman and his advisers, for some reason, distrusted the Russian dictator and his motives. They worried about Soviet dominance of Eastern Europe and refused to share America’s nuclear secrets. “So in the end,” Ms. Butler writes, “a fearful Stalin, the most paranoid of world leaders, was faced with an America that had refused to give up its weapons superiority and refused to grant his country aid.” In the U.S., she says, “fear again stalked the land”—that is, “fear of Russia.”

This view of the Cold War’s origins, faulting supposedly baseless American truculence, is reminiscent of the claims of the “revisionists” who, 50 years ago, challenged conventional accounts of U.S.-Russian relations. History may or may not move in cycles, but historians surely do.

—Mr. Hamby’s “Man of Destiny: FDR and the Making of the American Century” will appear in September.

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