Secret Affairs
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles.

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Chapter 16

Roosevelt's Last Months

Only a handful of people knew the extent of Hull's total collapse. Although his tuberculosis responded positively to treatment, he suffered from night sweats. Even if he were asked to recommend his successor, he asserted, "I would have had no voice in it anyhow, and no suggestion from me was wanted or would be effective—probably to the contrary."1 The one unspoken exception was that Hull so despised his former second in command that the secretary "was willing to take any other man than Sumner Welles."2

Ambassador Claude Bowers in Chile lamented that if only Welles had backed Hull's policies, he would have succeeded him as secretary of state. Josephus Daniels, who had retired from his ambassadorship in Mexico, added, "[Welles] is a very able man, and it is a misfortune that at this time our country should not have the benefit of his experience and his world knowledge."3 Welles, in fact, longed to return, but he realized that he never stood the remotest chance because "the scandal mongers" would continue to spread stories about his homosexuality. Permanently exiled from government service, Welles made his widest impact that winter from his Palm Beach home by working on a radio program,
starting a foreign affairs magazine, and editing a series of books for Harvard University. He also lobbied ardent New Dealers like Henry Wallace and Archibald MacLeish, who remained in the administration, to advance "liberal" causes.\textsuperscript{4}

With Welles excluded, the main contenders for the secretaryship narrowed down to James Byrnes and Edward Stettinius. The former had powerful congressional support, while the latter was under secretary. Some believed that Harry Hopkins had lobbied for his protégé Stettinius as a way to limit the influence of the Southern wing of the Democratic party, for those like Hopkins who had intimate links with the New Deal fought to maintain their White House power over party regulars, personified by politicians like Byrnes. By making the State Department a New Deal appendage, Hopkins hoped to minimize the importance of Southern Democrats in Congress and in the executive branch.

Roosevelt eliminated any doubt over the succession by summoning Walter George of Georgia and Thomas Connally of Texas, the Democratic leaders of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to the White House on November 27, 1944, and presenting them with Stettinius's promotion. Both were stunned and disappointed that Byrnes had been passed over, but neither voiced any serious objection. After all, Stettinius was the president's natural choice because Roosevelt intended to continue to operate as his own secretary of state and did not want to face Byrnes's strong opinions. Stettinius was convenient and would continue to carry out White House directives with Hopkins providing supervision.\textsuperscript{5}

Roosevelt had dramatically altered the traditional role of the diplomatic corps; its assigned mission to shape foreign policy had now crossed over to the White House. Hull, Moore, Welles, Duggan, and Bullitt were gone, while the man who appointed them remained, and he, more than anyone else, was responsible for the turbulence and disruption at the State Department. Career diplomats still handled their daily duties and made recommendations based on reports from around the world. On major decisions, rather than having them submit proposals for the president's approval, this process was reversed. The White House routinely took independent action and instructed the State Department how to respond. Whether the diplomatic corps understood the consequences
of these actions or not was immaterial; the White House had become the final initiator and arbitrator of foreign policy.

The president governed from the top of the pyramid and continually overestimated his abilities to make any decision that appealed to his fancy. He never memorialized his grand design with anyone, and that glaring flaw in his personal style of constructing American foreign policy caused havoc. Since he did not have the time or the inclination to follow up each one of his instructions, he expected Stettinius and his staff to fill in the specifics without clearly enunciated guidelines. One key result of this poorly conceived management style was that fourth-term Vice-President Harry Truman was never consulted about foreign affairs; therefore, he would be woefully unprepared to direct American diplomacy if he were forced to assume the presidency.

Roosevelt's management style was not an issue during Stettinius's Senate confirmation hearings, at which he was approved with only one dissenting vote. He seemed an adequate choice because of his familiarity with the diplomatic corps and his ability to maintain good congressional relations. Professional diplomats also welcomed his appointment because Stettinius had come to rely on them to make policy recommendations, a fact that pleased the professionals. The relatively smooth hearings, however, did not translate into enthusiastic support for the new appointee. Although he did not have many outspoken opponents, several influential politicians seriously questioned his qualifications. Treasury Secretary Morgenthau thought that Stettinius would fit the job description of a "good clerk"; Interior Secretary Harold Ickes thought that Stettinius did not have the appropriate training or intellectual depth; Senator George was even more derogatory in labeling the secretary "a nice enough lad if not too bright."

Stettinius did not appear to warrant such pessimistic comments because, in many ways, he was ideally suited to manage a rapidly expanding bureaucracy. To cope with this growth, he almost doubled the size of his staff and brought in a multitude of consultants for special assignments. These adjustments were long overdue. For example, in 1939 the State Department had 974 employees and by 1945 it had 3,767, an increase of almost 400 percent. During the same period, the number of foreign service personnel jumped from 3,730 to almost 7,000.
The budget had risen to $50 million. Joseph Davies, former ambassador to the Soviet Union, anticipated that the new secretary would do a creditable job, but that professional diplomats would cause friction: "Little men, who got into the saddle by fishing in the troubled waters of the Hull-Welles quarrel, are persistent and shrewd. Some of them are fine, but they generally are of a caliber that is governed by abstractions. The facts of life they cannot access. If they had to earn a living most of them would starve." 

Stettinius disagreed with these negative remarks because he heavily relied on advice from career officers. At the same time, he shocked Washington circles by firing Assistant Secretary Adolf Berle when the latter was in the middle of an international aviation conference. Breckinridge Long, suspected of anti-Semitism and tired of refuting these charges, retired, as did G. Howland Shaw. In their places, Stettinius announced his team in early December. Of the previous high-ranking appointments, only Dean Acheson remained, to handle congressional relations. Joseph Grew, a professional diplomat, moved into the under secretary slot. James Dunn, a long-time adviser to Hull and another career official, continued to direct European affairs. Nelson Rockefeller, whom Roosevelt had personally tapped, supervised Latin American matters. William Clayton, a Texas businessman who had made a fortune in cotton, concentrated on international economic issues. Julius Holmes, who had twenty years' experience in the diplomatic corps and later became president of General Mills of Brazil, worked on administrative matters. Archibald MacLeish, poet and librarian of Congress, directed public affairs. The press reacted immediately by dubbing the group six millionaires plus a poet; others scored them for their close connections with Wall Street and the career foreign service. When a reporter questioned the president on their qualifications as New Dealers, he responded that they were expected to follow orders; he did not worry about their political philosophy.

Grew's appointment was central. He had graduated from Groton and had entered Harvard two years before Roosevelt. They became friends, and since Stettinius was away from the capital much of the time during his tenure, Grew often went to the White House as acting secretary and worked well with the president. The new under secretary
also enjoyed pleasant relations with Stettinius, who had hoped “to bring new blood into the old Department and to sweep away some of the cobwebs.” He expected Grew to become his partner, and when Stettinius was traveling, Grew acted with full authority, a fact that he truly appreciated: “In all my service in Washington I never saw the Department better organized than during the Stettinius regime.”

While Stettinius was adjusting to his new role, Roosevelt was becoming deeply concerned over the direction of Soviet-American relations. Ambassador to Russia Averell Harriman, who had been appointed to Moscow in late 1943, initially thought that the United States could cooperate with Stalin, but that view slowly changed as communist forces swept across Eastern Europe. George Kennan became counselor to the embassy in the summer of 1944 and reinforced the ambassador’s growing trepidation. Kennan had long held that the Soviet system was antithetical to American democracy, and he also stressed that Stalin's motives, especially in regard to the liberation of Poland, were antagonistic to those of the United States. To impress upon the president the gravity of his concerns over the future of Soviet-American solidarity, Harriman returned to the United States in October, just before the presidential election, to warn Roosevelt that cooperation with Stalin would be extremely difficult because the dictator supported communist regimes in Eastern Europe based on repressive measures like the use of secret police.

Whereas Harriman and Kennan were skeptical about working with the Soviets, most State Department professionals accepted the importance of Soviet-American collaboration as advanced by Roosevelt, Hull, and Welles. Charles “Chip” Bohlen typified their position. Having entered the foreign service in 1929, he became a Soviet specialist and spoke Russian fluently. Hopkins had met him in late 1942 and was impressed by the younger man’s ability to get along with people and his knowledge of the Soviet Union. They talked further during the journeys to and from the Tehran conference, and in early 1944 Bohlen was appointed head of the department’s Soviet section; by the end of the year, he had moved up to serve as the department’s official liaison with the White House.

Before Roosevelt acted, he took both viewpoints into consideration, understanding that he had to deal cautiously with Stalin and concur-
rently recognizing that solidarity was critical in winning the war. While both sides continued to argue over the best approach toward Soviet policy, two days after his fourth inauguration, the president secretly left the White House for the second Big Three meeting in Yalta, to confer on military strategy to end the war and on the transition toward the postwar world. Along with the president, the American delegation included Stettinius, Pa Watson, and Byrnes; Hopkins had previously flown to London, Paris, and Rome to prepare for the talks and resolve as many problems as possible before they commenced. In early February the delegation arrived at Malta, where the Anglo-American military chiefs decided their strategy in the closing months of the European fighting.

Roosevelt then took off on the flight to the Crimea. Turbulence made the trip uncomfortable, and thus when the plane touched down at Yalta, the president was exhausted. Despite his weakened physical condition, his health was not a major factor at the conference, even though he worked long hours and sometimes ignored his rest periods in order to finish that day's business. He had every intention of serving as the facilitator between Stalin and Churchill. To the president, nothing was more important than the Anglo-American alliance, and concurrently he pressed diligently for cordial relations with the Soviet Union.

The conference opened on February 4 in the late afternoon, and although disagreements sometimes arose during the sessions, in general a spirit of cooperation prevailed; each leader promoted his own specific proposals but was open to compromise. The president put forth the latest form of the proposal for a future world organization, and Stalin ended the stalemate over the impasse that had arisen at Dumbarton Oaks by accepting the American veto formula. The Soviets also reduced their earlier demand for all sixteen of their republics to be seated in the general assembly to three. As for the Polish question, Roosevelt had to answer to an anti-communist, Polish-American constituency, and therefore he advanced the cause of Polish political self-determination in the face of Soviet occupation. Stalin insisted on having a Polish neighbor that was sensitive to Soviet fears; the long common border between the two countries would never again become the staging area for an invasion. Unable to resolve the vast gulf that separated them on this issue, the three leaders passed a nebulous proposal according to which Poland and the
rest of liberated Europe would hold free elections. To soothe Churchill's ego, he was granted an occupational zone for France in Germany, and all agreed to create a special commission to study German reparations. In East Asia, Churchill and Roosevelt conceded the Soviets use of the Manchurian railway as well as occupation of the Sakhalin and Kurile islands to protect the approaches to the Soviet harbor of Vladivostok in return for Stalin's pledge to declare war against the Japanese.  

At the conclusion of the talks, the Big Three left the Crimea on February 11, optimistic that they had strengthened the Grand Alliance. On the return voyage, Roosevelt began preparations for a report to Congress on the success at Yalta. But this positive atmosphere disintegrated when Pa Watson suddenly died from a heart attack; in addition, Hopkins had become so ill that he was confined to his cabin until reaching Algiers, where he left the presidential party to fly to the Mayo Clinic. Deeply upset by Watson's passing, Hopkins's incapacitation, and his own exhaustion, Roosevelt disembarked at Newport News, Virginia, at the end of February and immediately returned to the White House.

On March 1, he went before Congress for the first time in two years to report on the results of his travels, and observers witnessed a spectacle that they had never before seen. Rather than walk with the aid of his steel braces, the president was rolled into the House chamber in a wheelchair and transferred to an armchair to address his audience. Many who witnessed this startling event also noticed his drawn appearance and an unusually poorly delivered speech, during which he slurried his words and on several occasions seemingly lost his place in the text. To excuse these lapses, he mentioned his paralysis for the first time and alluded to the strain caused by his long journey.  

While the public riveted its attention on the presidential address and daily reports from the battlefields, hemispheric affairs slipped from the front pages, and, without Welles's driving presence, were eliminated as a major diplomatic imperative. Those who had been closely associated with the former under secretary were systematically reassigned or fired. Unfortunately for many of them, the new assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs, Nelson Rockefeller, made job security precarious: "when I entered the State Department . . . we cleared out most of the
people who were there [in the Latin American division]. . . . There were a hell of a lot of them [homosexuals] there. We got them out."18

Welles watched the departmental purge and the disintegration of the good neighbor policy in sorrow, declaring that it was "going to hell" and that his twelve years of work were "being lost." Despite such pessimism, he continued to speak out for hemispheric unity, urging governmental loans and the infusion of private capital to assist Latin American economies. By adopting these practices, the United States would aid industrialization and raise living standards throughout the Americas.19

Rockefeller hoped to reinvigorate the good neighbor spirit by embracing the call for an inter-American conference. No regional gathering had been convened since the Rio meeting in early 1942, and despite increasing Latin American pressure for one, Hull had effectively blocked it. Hemispheric statesmen wanted to voice their preference for the continuation of the inter-American system, whereas those who surrounded Hull promoted a more universal concept. Rockefeller embraced hemispheric solidarity, gained Stettinius's approval for another meeting, and then won presidential support.20

While the top American diplomatic leaders were in Yalta, Rockefeller independently arranged an agenda for the inter-American meeting, to be held outside Mexico City at the Chapultepec Castle. It opened on February 21, with Rockefeller and the Latin American delegates united on regionalism at the same time as Stettinius and his staff were flying from the Crimea, where they had vigorously advanced a global model. Stettinius's staff successfully prevented any open debate concerning universalism versus regionalism, but the United States could not prevent the Latin Americans from voicing their opposition to weakening the inter-American system. The Act of Chapultepec demonstrated their resolve, for the declaration guaranteed that the regional system protected any members from aggression by their neighbors.21 Ambassador George Messersmith, stationed in Mexico, participated in his delegation's debates, favored inter-American understanding, and sadly lamented that "Stettinius was . . . completely beyond his depth."22

Roosevelt did not play any significant role in the drama unfolding in Mexico. The day after addressing Congress on the results at Yalta, he headed for Hyde Park for a week of relaxation and then returned to the
White House to concentrate on the final military campaigns of the war. He also started to search for ways to achieve a lasting peace. Chiang Kai-shek and his communist foes needed to cooperate; Stalin had to compromise over the composition of the Polish government; the role of the Allied forces in Italy had to be clarified; and the White House had to sell participation in the world organization to the American people.23

Attorney General Biddle met with the president twice in the first half of March; he commented that the "President looked thin, brown and well." Two weeks later, Biddle still thought that Roosevelt "looked well, but thinner"; he was tired and planned to travel to Hyde Park and then Warm Springs "for a rest."24 During a visit to Washington on March 9, Canadian Prime Minister MacKenzie King talked with Eleanor, who admitted that her husband was tired from his Yalta trip. King saw the president on several occasions during his stay and "felt compassion for him. He looked much older; face very much thinner, particularly the lower part." The Canadian realized that Roosevelt was ill, but commented that he had not become nearly so unattractive as recent uncomplimentary photographs suggested: "he has lost a certain merriment, looks older and wearier, but has a certain firmness, which might carry him along for some time." The two leaders also discussed Roosevelt's reluctance to attend the opening ceremonies at the San Francisco meeting. Instead, he hoped to substitute Hull if he were well enough to travel, for his name symbolized global cooperation, and the new world body would have added stature if the former secretary were the first president of the security organization.25

On the evening of March 13, King and Roosevelt had dinner at the White House. The president's daughter Anna served as hostess, and she confided to the Canadian guest that her father "missed his old friends" like "Missy" LeHand and Pa Watson. Before sitting down to eat, the president introduced the prime minister to Lucy Rutherford, identifying her as a relative from South Carolina; King described her as "a very lovely woman and of great charm" and "exceptionally fine character."26 Although Franklin had promised Eleanor in 1918 never to see Lucy again, the president had blatantly broken that pledge. After she had left their employment, she had served as governess for the children of Winthrop Rutherford: handsome, wealthy, and thirty years her senior. They
eventually married, and she became a stepmother to his five children, including one girl and four boys. Winthrop and she formed a loving union and had a daughter. As he slowly began to deteriorate physically, Lucy painstakingly devoted much of her time to making him comfortable until his death as well as caring for the children. Eleanor did not know that her husband had invited Lucy to the White House. Yet those unmentioned meetings did not disturb Franklin’s outward relationship with his wife; that Saturday, Franklin and Eleanor celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary at a small family luncheon.

The complexities of Franklin’s private life did not interfere with his command decisions. During the final months of the war, a faction within the German hierarchy made overtures to British and American agents in Switzerland about surrendering. When Stalin learned about this activity, he accused Churchill and Roosevelt of purposely excluding him from those talks. The president vigorously denied the charge and chose to treat this exchange as a minor disagreement. He intended to cooperate with the Soviets in the future, but at the same time stick to a firm course for the present.

By the end of March, the president was extremely tired and had lost his appetite. Once more, he traveled to the South to take the mineral waters of Warm Springs, Georgia. Seldom did he take Eleanor on these trips, for she disliked the region, but to him, April in Georgia was one of the most picturesque times of the year. Nestled at the foot of an incline was the Little White House, and guests stayed at the two cottages to the right and left of the president. Besides bathing, Roosevelt often cruised over the narrow, winding roads to admire the cultivated land and breathtaking scenery from his own specially built car, with its hand-operated shift and brakes.

Upon his arrival, his spirits seemed to improve from the wholesome and invigorating climate. He had invited his cousins Laura Delano and Margaret Suckley to join him. Lucy arrived at the end of the first week in April with Elizabeth Shoumatoff, who had already gone to the White House shortly after the Casablanca meeting to paint Roosevelt’s portrait, and who had now been hired to do a watercolor of the president. When she started her work on the afternoon of April 10, she painted an ill man. Posing continued the next day, and in the late afternoon Franklin and
Lucy drove to his favorite spot overlooking the valley. When they returned for dinner with their guests, who included Treasury Secretary Morgenthau, Lucy sat to Franklin's right, and they chatted pleasantly throughout the meal.

On the morning of April 12, Roosevelt was sitting in his favorite brown leather chair in the living room, posing for Elizabeth. He looked healthy and was doing his "laundry," the name that he had given to the process of signing papers and the period of waiting for the ink to dry. Lucy and the two cousins talked, while Elizabeth painted ten feet away from the president. She constantly looked up at her subject. As lunchtime approached, the Filipino butler entered and started setting the table. Roosevelt pulled out a cigarette and announced that he would pose fifteen minutes longer; that would end the day's session. Elizabeth continued to paint and noticed that Roosevelt had suddenly raised his right hand and passed it over his forehead several times. At 1:15 P.M., he fell forward and lapsed into unconsciousness without saying a word.31

Dr. Bruenn was immediately summoned and diagnosed that his patient had suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. For the next several hours, the physician treated the dying president, but at 3:35 P.M., he stopped breathing, and Bruenn pronounced him dead. Shaken and in a state of hysteria, Lucy quickly packed and departed along with Elizabeth. As they approached Macon, Georgia, a flag was lowered to half staff; the news of Roosevelt's death had been released, and Lucy sobbed for the rest of the drive back to her home.32

Shortly after Roosevelt died, his corpse was placed in a casket draped with an American flag and loaded onto the last car of a train supplied by the Southern Railway Company (the same company that had carried Speaker Bankhead's body to Alabama and brought Welles back to the capital), leaving from Georgia and slowly heading north for Washington. Eleanor sat with her husband's coffin on the slow, painful trip to the capital. He had become an instant martyr, a symbol for victory. At the same time, as the train rolled northward, Eleanor struggled with the fact that Franklin had invited Lucy to Warm Springs. He was a national hero, but to her, he had broken a sacred pledge made decades earlier.33
When the train reached its destination, services were conducted in the East Room of the White House late in the afternoon of April 15. Most in attendance stood, for there were few chairs, and those who could not cram into the room listened to the simple ceremony over a loudspeaker placed outside. After the funeral, dignitaries and friends filed past the flag-draped coffin to pay their last respects. Once the official ceremony had concluded, the casket was placed on another train headed for Hyde Park, where Roosevelt was to be buried next to his parents in the rose garden. He had last visited his home in late March and now made his final journey. On Sunday, April 18, he was interred with an assemblage of family and close friends looking on. At last he was at peace.  

As the news of Roosevelt’s passing spread, condolences poured in from all corners of the world. Hull issued a press statement from his hospital bed:

No greater tragedy could have befallen our country and the world at this time. His inspiring vision, his high statesmanship and his superb leadership were factors without which the United Nations could not have come to the present phase of the war with victory just in sight. That leadership is gone, but his vision and the spirit of his statesmanship must continue to inspire us for the crucial task which even now is before us, the task of building a world peace. Mankind will be vastly poorer because of his passing.

Welles released his tribute: “A tower has fallen. A star has set. . . . Our hearts are heavy today because of the gallant leader we have lost. No man in our nation’s history has done more for our country.”

Joseph Davies was far more eloquent than either Hull or Welles. Roosevelt’s death, he wrote in his diary, “was the greatest and most costly of war casualties.” The capital was numb. Unfortunately for the president, he had not lived to see victory and the advent of an effective international peacekeeping organization, but he “went suddenly and without pain. He was at his zenith. For two years, he had held the Grand Alliance together.” Roosevelt, he wrote, “will be the martyred leader of the democratic forces of the world, who actually gave his life for the cause. For that is what he did. And for that, he will be remembered more
vividly and more warmly than any of the Big three, so far as the conduct of the war and its victory goes in this Second World War. And he was our American President!"  

Roosevelt had died before laying the foundation and constructing the framework of his postwar policies. Indeed, just before his death, he had been finishing a draft of his Jefferson-Jackson Day address, in which his theme was confidence: "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today." The passage hauntingly echoed the exhortation of his first inaugural: "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." He thus ended his presidency on the same note that he had opened the New Deal.

No one with sufficient stature or knowledge was prepared to assume his mantle. At a time when coordination was an imperative, he did not share with any staff member or confidant his outline for the future, and that failure to confide in anyone was his greatest shortcoming, something that even today that detracts from Roosevelt's legacy. If he was, as James MacGregor Burns calls him, a soldier of freedom, he certainly wears some tarnished medals. He understood the issues and the direction that he wished to pursue, but he did not know how to maintain the allegiance of the men who surrounded him. He was one of the few presidents who bonded world history to that of the United States, but he did not recognize that such a continuity was based on sharing information so that programs could become institutionalized. He led his nation to global prominence, and along the way he became a towering international figure. However, those who served under him in shaping foreign affairs developed enduring hatreds that prevented them from cooperating for the rest of their lives in helping to formulate American foreign policy.