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His Final Battle: The Last Months Of Franklin Roosevelt



Synopsis

"By far the most enigmatic leading figure" of World War II. That's how the British military historian John Keegan described Franklin D. Roosevelt, who frequently left his contemporaries guessing, never more so than at the end of his life. Here, in a hugely insightful account, a prizewinning author and journalist untangles the narrative threads of Roosevelt's final months, showing how he juggled the strategic, political, and personal choices he faced as the war, his presidency, and his life raced in tandem to their climax. The story has been told piecemeal but never like this, with a close focus on Roosevelt himself and his hopes for a stable international order after the war, and how these led him into a prolonged courtship of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator, involving secret, arduous journeys to Tehran and the Crimea. In between, as the war entered its final phase, came the thunderbolt of a dire medical diagnosis, raising urgent questions about the ability of the longest-serving president to stand for a fourth term at a time when he had little choice. Neither his family nor top figures in his administration were informed of his diagnosis, let alone the public or his closest ally, Winston Churchill. With D-day looming, Roosevelt took a month off on a plantation in the South where he was examined daily by a navy cardiologist, then waited two more months before finally announcing, on the eve of his party's convention, that he'd be a candidate. A political grand master still, he manipulated the selection of a new running mate, with an eye to a possible succession, displaying some of his old vigor and wit in a winning campaign. With precision and compassion, Joseph Lelyveld examines the choices Roosevelt faced, shining new light on his state of mind, preoccupations, and motives both as leader of the wartime alliance and in his personal life. Confronting his own mortality, Roosevelt operated in the belief that he had a duty to see the war through to the end, telling himself he could always resign if he found he couldn't carry on. Lelyveld delivers an incisive portrait of this deliberately inscrutable man, a consummate leader to the very last.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a readable account of the last year of Roosevelt's life, as he became increasingly ill, and potentially less capable to hold his office. The book really does focus on Roosevelt's life during this time, including his long trips away from the White House (which were concealed as part of wartime news blackout), ongoing meetings with his former mistress (who was with him when he died), and as much information as seems to be available on his health and interactions with his doctors (his medical files vanished in 1946). Roosevelt clearly was a very sick man in 1944 as he contemplated a fourth term, and book is filled with comments of those who saw him, noting how shockingly frail he was and how he sometimes seemed unfocused. The image we have in many pages of the book is a man barely able to work, often bedridden, aware he is very sick, but not necessarily knowing his ailments or prognosis (his doctors were publicly quite optimistic). The book is not only about Roosevelt's failing health (and death a few months in the fourth term), but really the main activities of his last year, including deciding whether to run for a fourth term, deciding on a vice president (and realizing he might be picking a successor), campaigning for re-election, planning and attending the Yalta Conference, and finally dealing with Soviet intransience while trying to set up the United Nations. Momentous times! The book doesn't discuss general history of the times in detail, but really focuses on the daily life of Roosevelt. You do get a good sense of Roosevelt's personality and style, which combined charm and deviousness, famously being able to impress people with conflicting beliefs that he was allied with each, when he would then reveal his own belief. This is a very good book.

"His Final Battle," is an intricate account of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's last term in office in the year 1944 (he would be the longest serving president in US history). The author, Pulitzer Prize winner, Joseph Lelyveld here draws on documents from everything from Roosevelt's cousin, Daisy Suckley's diary to medical documents by the President's physicians to understand the relationship between the President's health and his official acts. Obviously, the President had a lot on his mind, including the approach of D-Day, attending a summit conference in Tehran with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and deciding whether or not to

run for re-election. Another concern was who Roosevelt would select as a running mate. While Henry Wallace, the current vice president, believed that he was likely to be chosen, in fact, Roosevelt had several other candidates in mind as discussed here. In addition, Roosevelt traveled to meet with such icons as General Douglas MacArthur and Eisenhower, made decisions about the soon-to-be finished bombs, attended conferences in Quebec and dealt with violations of the Yalta accord. As the author shows, although Roosevelt was suffering from congestive heart failure brought on by chronic high blood pressure (also likely genetic, as his father had a heart attack at the same age) and under treatment, he was still mentally alert and able to juggle his many duties. He ultimately passed away in March in Warm Springs, Georgia. He also makes the point that President Roosevelt may have been more away of his doctors' diagnosis than has been previously portrayed by other biographies and provides evidence that supports this.

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