

FDR and The 'Secret Map'

During the bleak autumn of 1941, the United States had yet to enter World War II. President Franklin D. Roosevelt faced strong "anti-interventionist" sentiment at home despite the growing Axis threat abroad. Hitler's invading Panzers menaced Moscow, and German submarines threatened to cut off Britain, now resisting alone in the West. Winston Churchill sought more help from FDR, who pledged to make America a "great arsenal of democracy" and quietly ordered the U.S. Navy to escort trans-Atlantic convoys. But influential Americans—Socialist Norman Thomas, publisher W. R. Hearst, GOP Senator Robert A. Taft, aviator Charles Lindbergh, Progressive Robert M. La Follette, Jr.—led the fight against efforts to aid the Allies or prepare for war; on August 12, 1941, the House of Representatives renewed the year-old peacetime draft by only one vote. Here, historians John F. Bratzel and Leslie B. Rout, Jr., supply an intriguing footnote to FDR's campaign against the isolationists—before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ended the argument.

by John F. Bratzel and Leslie B. Rout, Jr.

In 1941, as the undeclared war in the Atlantic escalated, President Roosevelt grew increasingly bold in his campaign to undercut his isolationist foes in Congress. In a nationally broadcast address delivered at the Navy Day dinner on October 27, 1941, Roosevelt denounced German U-boat attacks on U.S. warships and promised that convoys bound for Britain would get through.

The President then made a startling disclosure:

Hitler has often protested that his plans for conquest do not extend across the Atlantic Ocean. I have in my possession a secret map, made in Germany by Hitler's government—by planners of the new world order. . . . It is a map of South America and a part of Central America as Hitler proposes to reorganize it.

This map, Roosevelt told his audience, took 14 Latin American republics and reduced them to "five vassal states . . . bringing the whole continent under their [Nazi] domina-

tion." The scheme, FDR added, was a clear threat to "our great life line, the Panama Canal." Furthermore, he explained, "the map makes clear, my friends, the Nazi design, not only against South America but against the United States as well."

Not unexpectedly, at a press conference the next day, Roosevelt was asked for a copy of the "secret map." The President demurred, stating that "it has on it certain manuscript notations, which if they were reproduced would in all probability disclose how . . . where the map came from." He added that disclosure would "also dry up the source of future information."

No Accident

Another reporter wanted Roosevelt to respond to Berlin's charge that the map was a forgery. Roosevelt started to change the subject, but the newspaperman persevered: "Let me pursue my question. . . . What would you say to the charge of the suspicion that that map was—had been foisted on you in some way? That it was also a forgery or a fake of some sort?"

FDR again tried to sidestep the query but finally replied that the map came from "a source which is undoubtedly reliable. There is no question about that." And that, aside from an angry disclaimer from Berlin, was the last official statement

about FDR's mysterious map.

Roosevelt's main reason for disclosing the secret map was to generate support for the de facto war then being waged in the Atlantic by the United States Navy against German submarines.* But his concern about German activity in Latin America was not feigned. Furthermore, many Americans shared Roosevelt's apprehensions about German designs on America's "soft underbelly." A poll conducted in February 1941 revealed that 86 percent of the respondents would favor a declaration of war if "any European power" attacked a Latin American country. This figure held steady in polls conducted during the remainder of the year.

Mark S. Watson, a military historian, summed up the situation from the President's perspective: "Politically in that day (1940–41) it was wiser to ask Congress for support in defending South American approaches . . . than in providing resistance to Hitler elsewhere: It was more visibly a 'defensive' measure."

There has probably never been a politician who understood the predictions of the American people as well as Roosevelt did. He realized

*On September 4, 1941, the U-652 fired a torpedo at the destroyer USS *Greer*. Seven days later, falsely depicting this incident as an unprovoked attack, Roosevelt ordered the Navy to "shoot on sight" German U-boats and surface raiders. Undeclared hostilities in the Atlantic may be said to have begun on this day.

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The secret map, FDR's "proof" of Nazi designs on the Western Hemisphere, shows South America and part of Central America re-portioned into five large republics. The handwritten notes, in German, pertain to questions of fuel—its production, storage, and shipment. That map is today kept in the FDR Library in Hyde Park, N.Y.

that the notion of hemispheric defense was a popular one. Besides being far simpler than sophisticated explanations of how the British Navy served as America's first line of defense against Hitler, it conjured up no terrifying images of American doughboys dying, as in World War I, on European battlefields. By implying that aid to Britain was a necessity if German tanks were to be prevented from landing on Rio's Copacabana Beach, Roosevelt came up with an argument that would satisfy

public opinion and erode antiwar isolationist sentiment.

For over two decades, historians could only speculate about the origins of Roosevelt's secret map. In 1963, however, H. Montgomery Hyde, a former British intelligence agent, supplied the first account of how FDR received the map. He stated in his book *Room 3603* (1962) that it had been purloined from a German courier, who "met with an accident." William Stephenson (codename: Intrepid), chief of British

Security Co-ordination (BSC),* took the map and passed it on to William Donovan, the U.S. coordinator of information. Donovan then had the map taken to FDR. Years later, another William Stevenson, writing in *A Man Called Intrepid* (1975), confirmed most of Hyde's account and added that Gottfried Sandstede was the luckless "German courier." According to Stevenson, Sandstede paid for his bungling with his life: "His identity as the source of information found its way back to the German Gestapo agents in Buenos Aires. They had Sandstede killed in yet another of the many 'accidents' that marked this secret battle."

This account *seems* reasonable enough. The trouble is that in September 1941 Sandstede, the head of the Nazi *Auslandsorganisation* (overseas organization) in Argentina, returned to Germany neither dead nor disgraced. Indeed, upon his arrival he was promoted to the rank of *Legationsrat, I Klasse* (consul of legation, first class). He left the diplomatic corps in April 1943 to join an SS combat unit. Both the German Federal Republic Foreign Office and U.S. military intelligence agree that Sandstede was killed in battle on the Russian front on March 9, 1944. Unless this is the "accident" both Hyde and Stevenson were referring to, we must consider their explanations of events to be inaccurate.

The history of the secret map is even more bizarre than the Hyde-Stevenson accounts would suggest. Sandstede was, in fact, involved. As *Auslandsorganisation* chief for Argen-

tina, he was party to, if not responsible for, the decision to put up a huge map of Latin America in the Buenos Aires Nazi Party headquarters in 1940—a map reputedly showing some provocative territorial rearrangements. Incorporated into Argentina were the *Islas Malvinas* (Falkland Islands), Paraguay, southern Bolivia, and Uruguay. Brazil was given a slice of northeastern Argentina (Misiones Province) and the rest of Bolivia, as well as Dutch and French Guiana. Panama was added to Colombia; British Guiana, to Venezuela. And Ecuador was shared by Peru and Colombia. What the map implied was clear: If Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela cooperated with the Nazis, they might expect support for their territorial ambitions once Germany won the war.

Doctoring the Evidence?

The first report on this controversial map was sent to Washington, D.C., in March 1941 by Lt. Col. M. A. Devine, U.S. military attaché in Argentina. He described it as a heavy-handed but effective propaganda ploy designed to appeal to the expansive ambitions of the larger South American countries. Devine also reported that this German map was drawing favorable responses:

At the appropriate time, I had an opportunity of asking the assistant chief from military intelligence in the Argentine government if he had seen the map, and he replied in the affirmative, voicing no objection to the contemplated territorial adjustments.

When and exactly how the British obtained a copy of the map in Nazi headquarters must remain a matter of conjecture. What is certain, though, is that the BSC obtained one or more maps from Nazi sources in

*British intelligence was divided into MI-5 (counterintelligence) and MI-6, which is also known as the SIS (Secret Intelligence Service). William Stephenson took charge of MI-6 operations in the Western Hemisphere in May 1940. Thereafter, MI-6 in that region was known as the BSC.



FDR and Winston Churchill aboard the Prince of Wales just off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941. At this meeting, the two leaders agreed upon the Atlantic Charter, an eight-point proclamation of democratic principles.

Argentina. We believe that these were forwarded to Canada, where they were "doctored" at "Station M" (the BSC's technical laboratory in Ontario, Canada). Even today, the British will not say what changes they made on the map. But neither do they deny what we allege—that they made the territorial alterations of Latin America appear to be even more extensive than those reportedly proposed on the original Buenos Aires map. Furthermore, the changes were different. (The Guianas, for example, were all given to France, that is, to Vichy France, and Chile was now shown as one of the expanded republics.) A "touched-up" map was then passed on to Donovan, who in turn had it delivered to Roosevelt.

Then comes the most intriguing question: Did the President think that the document he received was the genuine article, or did he suspect that it had been altered by the Brit-

ish for propaganda purposes? Ex-operative Hyde informed us that Intrepid "never told anyone apart from trusted members of his own staff, such as myself, of these activities. I am sure that Donovan and FDR believed the map to be genuine."

An even more reliable account was supplied by James R. Murphy, an executive assistant to Donovan in 1941 and currently a Washington, D.C., attorney. Murphy, who actually delivered the map to the White House, said this:

I am sure that neither I nor Donovan was ever told that the "map" was not authentic, or had been "doctored," and I am also certain [that] if Donovan had been told, or knew that it was not authentic, he would not have given it to the President.

Hyde and Murphy are both probably correct. FDR knew that the British were decoding top secret German messages by means of the "Ultra"



William Stephenson (left), chief of British Security Co-ordination, and William Donovan (right), U.S. coordinator of intelligence information.

process.* Thus, it was reasonable for him to assume that British intelligence might also have obtained the map by supersecret means. Still, FDR may have wondered privately how His Majesty's Secret Service had come up with a document that so perfectly suited his (and Britain's) needs.

In fact, at the time, State Department officials were troubled by British attempts to gull their Washington allies. In a September 5, 1941, memorandum forwarded to Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Assistant Secretary Adolf Berle warned that British intelligence agents were manufacturing documents detailing Nazi conspiracies in South America. What most disturbed Berle was that the British were seeking U.S. diplomatic cooperation in order to validate these forgeries and thereby create a hemisphere-wide

*Codename for method developed by British scientists headquartered at Bletchley Park (England), whereby messages coded on German "Enigma" coding machines were intercepted and decoded.

Nazi bugaboo. His conclusion was understated: "I think we have to be a little on our guard against false scares."

On the other hand, policy considerations made it unlikely that FDR was going to question too closely the authenticity of potentially useful material. Roosevelt's greatest concern was the threat that Hitler posed to the security of the United States. And his most pressing need during October 1941 was to repeal the last restrictions of the Neutrality Acts of 1936-37. This legislative action would allow him to arm merchant ships and convoy them all the way into British ports. If German U-boats attempted to interfere with these activities, the U.S. Navy, with the consent of Congress, would retaliate. After a sharp debate, the legislation cleared the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by a vote of 13 to 10 on October 25.

Roosevelt probably knew that he had the votes necessary to push the repeal statute through the Senate,

but the floor fight in the House of Representatives would be bitter, and the acrimony would do nothing to unite the nation behind his policies. Then, on October 21, when Donovan informed the President that the secret map had been made available by the British, it would have been immediately obvious to FDR that the map could bolster his position while undermining that of his isolationist foes. Moreover, so long as FDR allowed none of his adversaries to examine the map, the design for aggression that it supposedly documented could not be challenged.

We presented our conclusions to Joseph P. Lash, the author of *Eleanor and Franklin* (1971) and *Roosevelt and Churchill, 1939-1941: The Partnership That Saved the West* (1976). On the question of the map's relationship to Roosevelt's foreign policy, he wrote the following:

It was Roosevelt's policy to wage war without declaring it. United States rationale in the Atlantic had shifted from freedom of the seas to hemispheric defense against Nazi penetration. And this map seemed to fit the new approach.

Actually, some of the most convincing evidence supporting our in-

terpretation was supplied by FDR himself. Speaking to Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., on May 14, 1942, the President expanded upon U.S.-Argentine relations and, at the same time, revealed his larger strategic design:

I may have one policy for Europe and one diametrically opposite for North and South America. I may be entirely inconsistent, and furthermore, I am perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help us win the war. . . .

Perhaps the ultimate significance of the secret-map episode is what it shows about Roosevelt—and, in particular, about his increasing determination to stand up to the Axis powers. In dealing with the Nazis abroad and with the isolationists at home, he had come to believe, well before America went to war, that truth must often take second place to national security and political expediency. As it turned out, the final restrictions on the Neutrality Acts were repealed by the Senate (50 votes to 37) on November 7, 1941, and by the House (212 to 194) on November 13, the latter occurring just 24 days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ended all debate.

