

A Churchillian Moment Missed

In the summer of 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt focused almost exclusively on ending the Great Depression. He signed the National Recovery Act into law in mid-June. FDR's Executive Orders on subsistence housing, public works, the N.R.A. code flowed in quick succession. All were designed to "encourage national recovery, to foster fair competition and provide for the construction of certain useful public works."

Even the War Department was drafted into the recovery effort. The emerging Civilian Conservation Corps cut short classes at the Army's General Staff School so students could organize the conservation camps. The Navy started work on 32 vessels with funds FDR transferred from the National Industrial Recovery Act.

And yet, Roosevelt kept a wary eye on Asia and Europe. Having conquered Manchuria, Japanese and Chinese troops clashed in Hebei Province. Japanese airplanes bombed cities north of Peking throughout the summer.

In Berlin, the American Consul General reported that certain "men now running Germany were 'psychopathic cases.'" Their goal was to forge "the most capable instrument of war that there has ever existed." On July 14, 1933, the Germany government outlawed all political parties except the National Socialists.

Three months earlier, Winston Churchill had risen in the House of Commons to decry England's anemic air defenses. He argued that "the possession of an adequate air force is almost complete protection for the civilian population, not indeed against injury and annoyance but against destruction." He pled with his colleagues to "concentrate upon our air defenses with greater vigour."

Churchill quickly was labeled a "jingo." And the debate over RAF appropriations wandered aimlessly across civil aviation, patrols in Iraq, amphibian aircraft, meteorology, poison gas, germ warfare, army and navy rivalries, vociferous pacifists, old men savoring more armaments, London's annihilation, and, unbelievably, the costs of an airmail postage stamp. There was more than enough hot air to fill a dirigible.

Reading that debate with 20/20 hindsight makes even the well-intentioned politicians look like fools. Why could they not see the shape of an emerging world? War in Asia, the rise of Nazi Germany, the destructive power of air assaults was the grist of their morning papers. But clairvoyance was not the gift of those small, forgettable men.

To leaders like Roosevelt and Churchill, however, foresight was a critical, differentiating capacity. They managed to disengage from the mundane, explore the broadest range of possibilities, assess the longer term risks their nations faced, and act decisively. And they did so in smoke and confusion of political battle.

That's why the United States Senate's vote to end F-22 production was so myopic. Like the parliamentarians who demeaned Winston Churchill's warnings, the 58 senators who cut short the production lines in Texas, Georgia, California and Connecticut focused on yesterday's news. They could not – and would not – look over the horizon. They failed to see the emerging threats to our national security.

Countries like Russia and China remain intent on building fifth generation fighters. Their governments understand that projecting power requires more than drones and helicopters. Clearly, their military strategists' eyesight is much better than 20/20; it is focused on the year 2020 and beyond.

In this time of global economic and political turmoil, America could use equally farsighted leaders that prepare us for all eventualities. Unfortunately, they were in the minority this week.

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